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In this project, I examine the uses of euphemistic language and concealed erotic content in Charlotte Brontë's novels *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* with additional support from *Shirley*. Based on historicized readings of repression, I argue that the author includes non-traditional gender roles and sexualities in her novels to question the status quo. Because of the culture of publishing in the mid-nineteenth century, however, she was not free to write openly about sexual activities. Instead, Brontë used figurative language and sensual imagery to convey non-traditional gender performance and moments of eroticism.

EUPHEMISM'S USEFULNESS: ELUSIVE  
EROS IN THE NOVELS OF  
CHARLOTTE BRONTË

by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean.  
- Robert Louis Stevenson

#### Euphemism's Usefulness

Throughout the history of story-telling, authors and poets have acknowledged the struggle of putting thought into word: language is limit. A piece of literature can be read differently by each reader, though the words themselves are the same. Authors often use these individual interpretations to their advantage, creating complex and multifaceted works based on the potential of their chosen words. Although there is room for misunderstanding, increased range of expression is enabled by an indirect approach. Each figurative use of word or phrase denotes a literal surface reading of the expression and multiple further meanings as well. The layers of meaning create a richer reading experience, allowing readers to make a connection depending on their own individual impressions. Figurative language also allows an author to better develop their own ability to put thought and experience into word, broadening their access to description by allowing one word or phrase to stand for others.

Non-direct language is also especially helpful to authors who mean to convey a concept that is difficult or forbidden. The author can choose appropriate words for reader comprehension and potential publication to discuss a subject that could be difficult to

understand or unpublishable according to social norms. Religious radicalism, fiery political theories, direct opposition to powerful people, sexuality, death—the audience is still aware, even if subconsciously, of these issues. An author has unknown and varying intentions, but is able to write the unwritable through figurative language.

Prose writers in the nineteenth century had a daunting task in negotiating the changing landscape of acceptable discourse. In the realm of sexuality and social ideals, permissible expression and even private performance were monitored and censored. Although there was an increasing interest in the erotic, as evidenced by studies such as Steven Marcus's oft-cited *The Other Victorians* and collections of first-hand accounts such as *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period*, there was also a zealous movement to smother such scandalous accounts. Peter N. Stearns outlines the sexual revolution, saying it was largely motivated by economic and social pressures which led to "an acceleration in the production of pornographic literature" in the eighteenth century. Michel Foucault describes this shift, arguing that it became increasingly compulsory to use "authorized vocabulary" when discussing sex, because "in order to gain mastery over it [sexuality] in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language" (17). Language, then, though imperfect, was useful as a limiting force, a way to repress (Foucault would say "regulate") sexual behaviors and the ways sex was discussed. Indeed, Foucault goes on to say "what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking" (34). William A. Cohen reiterates Foucault's point in a somewhat more eloquent way: "sexual unspeakability does not function simply as a collection of prohibitions for Victorian



writers. Rather, it affords them abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse—richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent” (3). Victorians used a number of “inventions” to avoid transgression of social norms while concurrently speaking volumes in “code.”

The critical discussions surrounding what can and cannot be written (or spoken) are complex and far-reaching. For my purposes, I would like to focus on the conundrum of expressing things which are difficult to discern or socially taboo and so are problematic to describe, such as the erotic. Foucault agrees that sexuality in the nineteenth century was understood as part of the private or pathologized spheres of society, and required its own language. Because it was separated and treated apart from ‘normal’ language, sex was, I argue, ‘unwriteable’ in the sense that it could not be written about in the same ways as other topics. ‘Unwriteable’ acts and behaviors go beyond the erotic, however, and include aspects of human experience, such as gender performance, which are similarly difficult to describe because of stereotypes and expectations. To assert that a woman is “performing masculine” plays on subtle nuances of both what “a woman” is, what “masculine” is, and also what “performing” entails. I argue that authors resorted to figurative language and euphemism to find creative ways to write the unwriteable.

Figurative language is invaluable to writers, as it infinitely expands their toolbox of available expressions. It allows silence to speak, and gives a voice to the unheard; as Foucault says, “there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of *not saying* such things”

(27, emphasis mine). The role of euphemism in writing is twofold: first to allow an author to write the unwriteable, and more importantly, to bind the surface level reading to the unwritable truth. This project will explore variations in the deployment of euphemism primarily using two of Charlotte Brontë's novels, *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, with additional support from *Shirley*. I will illustrate the importance of recognizing the connection between surface level ideologies and underlying realities created by euphemism, and how Brontë uses both readings in conjunction to probe social norms.

To define Euphemism is to probe the reasons euphemism is used; the realms of "sickness, death, sex and bodily functions" were the essential "motivators of euphemism" and are some of the most basic events in life (Allan and Burrage 8). They are also some of the least pleasant or socially acceptable events, and seem to be unwriteable. Hence the 'motivation' toward euphemism, defined as an expression which "is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offence, that of the audience, or of some third party" (Allan and Burrage 11). Notably, the very meaning of euphemism binds it to social acceptance and interpersonal expectations of maintaining "face" or, essentially, not trespassing taboos (Allan and Burrage 12). This important factor, that of society, is addressed by what Keith Allan and Kate Burrage call the "Middle Class Politeness Criterion," which they define as follows: "in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism rather than its dispreferred counterpart(s)" (31).

Taking into account the need for socially acceptable discourse as a motivator to use euphemism, we can see that authors wishing to write about the primary categories, including sex, would benefit from the use of the strategy. Brontë uses euphemism to discuss not only sex in general, but also non-heteronormative sex. For example, her treatment of female friendships, which I discuss at length in chapter two, could occasionally be seen as homoeroticism. Because it could not be openly discussed (per the middle class politeness criterion), Brontë uses extended euphemistic landscape descriptions and subtle visual euphemistic indicators. In *Shirley*, best friends Shirley and Caroline go for a walk together early in their acquaintance; after thinking wistfully of “penetrating” into the forest, Caroline describes it thus: “That break [in the forest] is a dell; a deep, hollow cup, lined with turf as green and short as the sod of this Common; [...] in the bottom lie the ruins of a nunnery” (179). The euphemisms are several: the ‘break in the forest’ being a genital cleft, the “deep, hollow cup” the vaginal opening, the “turf,” pubic hair, and the “ruins of a nunnery” imply that there, “in the bottom” (of the vagina) is no longer a chaste seat of innocence. Shirley replies, “we will go—you and I alone, Caroline—to that wood, early some fine summer morning, and spend a long day there” (179). Given the initial description of their destination and Shirley’s insistence that the two girls go alone, the careful reader of euphemism can imagine the outcome of the erotic setting.

By defining euphemism by categorical use (topic motivating use) and social setting (middle class politeness criterion), Allan and Burridge target precisely why euphemism was particularly useful to Victorian writers interested in sexuality. Brontë

used the category Allan and Burridge call “artful euphemism” which authors use to “exploit euphemism to publicly expound taboo topics, yet at the same time pretend to disguise that purpose” (220). The social climate in the mid-nineteenth century made it necessary for authors to conceal their controversial topics in innocuous language.

“Erotically discreet, the Victorian novel nonetheless subtly constructs the sexual,” says Dennis W. Allen (xiii). Euphemism is the very mode that allows writers to expose and conceal meanings. Because of social constraints, especially prominent in the Victorian era, writers may have found it difficult to convey certain ideas despite their relevance or importance to their work and the world. Logically, the pressures involved in this changing world of sexuality influenced writers to challenge socially accepted norms but they were forced to do so through veiled language. Stearns says, “a number of writers (both male and female) began by the early nineteenth century to write about the need to cast aside some of the traditional assumptions around sexual behavior” (86). However, Stearns admits that the Victorians were conflicted about these liberal impulses and that “new efforts to constrain sexuality” began to appear, based largely on the “shock at the widening gap between traditional values [...] and many of the innovations in popular behavior and public culture” (88). Thus the disconnect between the stereotypical Victorian libertines and their oppressors. Witness the growth of societies such as “The Society for the Suppression of Vice,” whose core beliefs included ‘supressing’ “blasphemous publications” and “obscene books, prints, etc.” (Hemyng 2). Writers may have been bound by publishers, censors, their own sense of morality—any number of things might have prevented an author from writing what she believed she “meant” to

write. Regina Barreca describes the trend: “without being able to explore, except metaphorically [or euphemistically], the sexual nature of characters, writers fell upon the highly wrought and deeply upholstered symbolism so often associated with Victorian literature” (3). Euphemism, then, provides a way to write meaning and not write meaning.

Although all figurative language is a kind of misdirection, euphemism creates a diversion, freeing writers to make the implications they intend to make, allowing the willing reader to explore extended meaning while maintaining a surface tension that supports the superficial reader. Stearns describes this need with strong language: “decorum must also surround the public culture, so that sexuality would not be irresponsibly encouraged or vulgarities find the light of day” (90). Young girls, who the Victorians were notoriously concerned about keeping uncorrupted,<sup>1</sup> could, one imagines, read a euphemistic passage at face value. A cigar is just a cigar. Older readers, more experienced in the ‘realities’ of the world, would be privileged to know the underlying sexual acts being glossed over. A cigar is a penis. In this way, literature could be both real and ideal, representing the world as it should be (sinless) and the world as it was (lusty).

“Ideal” and “real” are fuzzy terms full of connotations and multiple layers of meaning. Society has myriad ways of thinking about itself, many social rules and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Charlotte Brontë includes this typical censorship in several of her novels, including *Shirley*: “Slight topics alone might be discussed between them; for with a woman—a girl [Caroline]—Mr. Helstone would touch no other” (85).

expectations are present in even the most simple of actions. On a grand scale, there are common impulses in place which guide each successive generation of citizens to conform to slowly changing concepts of what society should be. Subtle hegemony helps to create positive unity, a sense of nationalism, and a feeling of belonging. As I see things, these great, overarching forces can be called “ideologies,” certain constructions shared by many; a system of cultural beliefs. I refer to the contours of what Steven Marcus calls the “official views of sexuality” or “official culture” (xix). Individual examples of these “ideologies” are what I describe as “ideals”—more particular pieces of the whole. On the other hand (though not opposing them) there is what I call “reality” or “actuality”: ‘unofficial’ (perhaps even ‘unsanctioned’) expressions of people in their singular lives. While ideals combine to form broad ideologies, individuals’ actions combine to form “real” society. In writing, authors often reflect the “real” in portrayals of actual events, believable situations, and individual accounts of experience as their primary narrative scaffolding, as opposed to an appeal to grand, lofty fantasies based on systems of belief (“ideologies”). For bringing the real and the ideal together, euphemism is especially powerful.

The bond between the real and the ideal is cemented in the use of euphemism each time a writer uses figurative language to indicate both levels of reading at once. The two readings, literal and implied, stay discreet in essence—they are not united entirely. But euphemism serves to bridge the two, linking them and allowing access to one through the other through the relationship created by the signifying word or phrase, often directly related to both the literal and figurative meaning (e.g. “water closet” for

toilet). Peter Stockwell defines euphemism by this very trait, distinguishing it from both idiom and metaphor by describing it as “not so much a lexical replacement by a dissimilar word [as in “kick the bucket” for death], as a replacement by a closely associated word” such as ‘make love’ for sex (43). In Stockwell’s subsequent study on euphemisms for death found in obituaries, he points out that “omission is itself a form of euphemism” (44). By circumnavigating the taboo topic (such as death, or in this study, sex) an author nonetheless is creating an image out of negative space. The outline of the object describes the object without overtly naming it, a version of writing the unwriteable.

Euphemism is the description of something distasteful in moderated words, so it only makes sense that sex and death are the two of the primary arenas in which euphemism operates. Both are unwriteable, the first because of social constraints and perhaps the moral objections of the writer, the second because of its inaccessibility to the living writer and reader and the grief it causes, a feeling difficult to define and describe. Both are private events in the context of Victorian culture. Euphemism helps make these events easier to accept in public, and so links private and public while acknowledging that there is a certain distinction between the two. Euphemism allows the appearance of modesty while acknowledging the underlying existence of erotic events. Sex and death have been linked in many other ways throughout history as well; it is no coincidence that an orgasm is called *la petite mort*. In *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*, Barreca introduces the link between the two:

The need to indicate sexual activity without being able to name it caused the repressed sexuality in a text to be reflected in speech patterns and rhetorical structures. Clearly, repressed sexuality and a fervid interest in mortality are not the exclusive property of Victorian literature. Yet, as a number of critics from Foucault to Gay, from Steven Marcus to Elaine Showalter have indicated, the twinning of sex and death provided the novels and the poetry of the period with a sort of counter-balanced framework within which fertile narrative strategies operated. (2)

Both sex and death are unspeakable, both are essential parts of humanity. Because they are or were unwritable, as Barreca says, the need to express them fostered complex and artful approaches to writing.<sup>2</sup> Brontë explores sexuality more often than death, her focus being on gender performance and non-traditional erotic expressions portrayed in carefully shielded terms. The social repression of expression of sexuality continues in mainstream literature of our day, most obviously via any number of “forbidden books” lists.

On the one hand, society urged everyone to strive for the ideal using these censoring pressures in literature and beyond. Religion was an important daily influence, and also encouraged movement toward sinless life.<sup>3</sup> These proper limits and their strict

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<sup>2</sup> Sex and death both continue to be taboo subjects even in our time, perhaps even more than in the nineteenth century. Barreca asserts that there was a “common nineteenth-century attitude toward sexuality, an openness of inquiry we repressed moderns find so shocking [...] By knowing more, we allow ourselves to understand considerably less about sexuality than did the Victorians. We are obsessed with the subject, but we have no curiosity and certainly no daring” (14-15).

<sup>3</sup> Repression, sex, and religion are all tied very closely together. However, in this essay I would like to focus on secular culture’s influence on the repression of eroticism in literature, and so will largely be leaving out discussions of religion. For more on religion



enforcement were products of the natural evolution of British society. To appeal to a wide audience and be successful, then, most main-stream novel writers would have had to limit their portrayal of private deeds to protect the most innocent of young ladies.

In the form of the novel especially, we can see the other side of an author's impulses. To stay true to the genre, historically based on narratives appealing to actual or believable events, writers felt pressure to base their narratives on details of all aspects of life familiar to the reader. This meant, of course, depicting even the private and illicit parts of society.<sup>4</sup> This subtle outlet also allowed for a release of a truer human nature. The issue was an important one of the day. Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, also uses allegorical language to show that repression can lead to unhealthy, unproductive outbursts and violence in his story of proper Dr. Jekyll and emotional Mr. Hyde.

Thus, between the real and the ideal is the tension of opposites. An ideal, by definition, is unattainable (only approachable) and so is part of the amorphous void of forms. Reality, on the other hand, is clearly physical. There is a reflection of the ideal in the actual, just as there is an attempt in reality to mimic ideals. Still separate, it is

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as related to sex, see John Maynard's *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> There may have also been a sensationalist impulse in some works, leading the writer to include erotic hints (or even openly erotic scenes) for the sake of causing a stir, such as the anonymous *My Secret Life*, similar to the earlier *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland. Also noteworthy were the works of the Marquis de Sade and Lord Byron, the latter having indisputably influenced Brontë. Although these are also important commentaries on the state of society, I focus on Brontë's novels in part because they work *within* socially regulated tropes (such as the marriage plot) to question the underlying social norms.

obvious that real and ideal are not true opposites but related in complicated and obscure ways. Joseph Allen Boone examines “ideology” in *Tradition Counter-Tradition*: it is “a system of *representations*, of significations, that constitute the sphere of social relations into which each individual is fitted. [...] Foremost, ideological structures work to create the appearance of a unitary, coherent worldview” (7 emphasis original). Although these “structures” operate in society to gloss over differences, ideological systems are made up of individuals, necessarily unique.

The ideologies at work in the English novel as Boone describes them shape marriage and gender performance, and thus sexuality. Fiction, he says, plays a role in the formation and re-formation of ideologies.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, Boone’s “tradition” is the Victorian marriage-plot which Brontë describes (via Caroline Helstone’s musings in *Shirley*) as “the ordinary destiny” (149). Boone says that at face value, this trope is closed to question because of its widely accepted “truth.” His “counter-tradition” then, comes about when marriage (and, following it, the role of women and their sexuality) is re-opened to questioning.<sup>6</sup> This push-pull of established norm versus questioning contradiction “necessarily works to decenter the presumed universality of the dominant sexual order” (Boone 21). Brontë’s novels fit precisely into this category: they play to

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<sup>5</sup> Chris R. Vanden Bossche enthusiastically agrees, which I will address in greater detail below as specifically related to Brontë’s novels.

<sup>6</sup> Boone discusses the difficulties in choosing the terms “tradition” and “counter-tradition” in section III of his introduction, and readily admits that the two are much less binary opposition and much more sliding scale than they rhetorically appear.

the ideological marriage trope but also undermine its authority, sculpting new “traditions.”

Establishing that ideologies and actualities do not totally oppose one another begs the question of how they are related and interact. As described above, there are certain situations in which they affect each other directly, as reality changes the expectations set by ideals and ideals sway reality’s enactment. These are significant, culturally altering events generally taking a number of years or even generations to fully take effect. I am much more interested in small everyday occurrences in which individuals attempt to bring together their own ideologies and actualities. Figurative language is a bridge that makes this passage between the two possible, and euphemism plays a special role in crossing between the realms. Because of its ability to refer to multiple meanings with just one set of referents, figurative language is able to represent both the physical actualities of a scene and also its deeper, ideological implications.

Figurative language combines social practice with amorphous ideals in such a way that they are conveyed together to the reader simultaneously. Through careful observation, the reader can become aware of both the literal and the implied meaning. I have thus far described an author writing reality and hinting at ideology, but it is in fact often the other way around entirely—authors write to the ideal and merely imply less savory actualities. Sexuality, with all its newly “discovered” kinks, was the stuff of science and needed to be kept out of the hands of girls, so although it was a part of reality in society, there was a pressure to focus on only the ideal of chastity in literature.

Subtle censorship, both external and self-imposed, led authors to depict a larger proportion of their writing with idealism and include less with realism in their novels. Eroticism of all kinds, violence, and dangerous or subversive acts, or even references to other creative arts depicting such things, were kept to a minimum. Writers, still dedicated to accurate portrayal of the world in the novel, relied on figurative language and especially euphemism to convey the underlying details. Their publicly acceptable works often included privately understood actions; their carefully written ideals revealed reality.<sup>7</sup>

The space between the common dichotomies of private and public, erotically charged and yet complex with respect to gender and sexuality, allowed authors to combine realms normally held distinct.<sup>8</sup> The expectations of Victorian society were rigid and powerful, but undercurrents of passion and individual expression worked their way into narratives of the age. Writers felt that to become successful, they needed to adhere to expectations. But to stay true to their art, authors were impulsively driven to create

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<sup>7</sup> For Example, take the case of politically-charged *Mary Barton* by Brontë's close friend, Elizabeth Gaskell. The traditional Victorian marriage (or romance) plot conceals subversive political commentary on the increasing problems related to industrialization. Similar forces are at work in the contemporaneous *Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot and Brontë's own *Shirley*, as well as several novels by Charles Dickens and others.

<sup>8</sup> The synthesis of these seeming opposites can be represented as a whole in the character of the gypsy, a figure appearing briefly in *Jane Eyre* as a cover for Rochester, dressed in drag, who is exploring the private lives of his guests via 'fortune telling.' For a deeper investigation into the gypsy's role in Victorian writing, see Deborah Epstein Nord's *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807-1930* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

new and real works which did not necessarily fit neatly into the box society had created. As Foucault says, “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance;” using their *authority*, writers carved out a space for combining their impulses with society’s expectations in their works, making “discourses [into] tactical elements” to write the unwriteable (101).

So, the writer of a novel is pulled in two opposing directions, both of which were necessary to maintain the normal functioning of society: on the one hand writing must appropriately entertain and also instruct, and on the other hand, it should accurately reflect the author’s truths. The realist novel is a reflection of the world but is also often a didactic rhetorical strategy used to influence readers, a portrait of reality but also an encouragement to strive for the ideal virtuous life. Brontë illustrates these trends in her novels, but especially *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Her writing process lends itself especially well to this examination; Brontë wrote some of her works in a minute script in books as small as two inches by two inches. Phyllis Bentley notes, “when one is printing tiny letters on a tiny sheet one thinks quite a while before one writes” and part of Brontë’s strength is her “admirable choice of words” (26). Certainly, Brontë would have maximized the efficiency of language by using specialized narrative strategies to convey multiple layers of meaning at once in her novels.

The conflicting forces of realism and ideologies are united but not fully fused via the use of euphemism. Figurative language, I have shown, may unite the several levels of meaning by using a single referent word or phrase. Not an equation or an open-ended

designator, euphemism creates a distinct indication of a relationship between written implication and actuality. The real and the ideal must coexist because without social constraints, the dark underside of passion could reign supreme and create anarchy. But without an outlet for such passion, we would suffocate in polite little prisons.

To further emphasize the coexistence of the real and the ideal, I posit that much writing includes indicators of the ideologies working in society within believable real-world narratives. Since social pressures to strive for virtue were an active part of an individual's story, those influences were actually part of a narrative's realistic appeal while also expressing the very ideals in question. Allow me to explain more thoroughly with an example. A young woman is attracted to the handsome boy who lives next door. She knows she should not be seduced by him because illegitimate children would ruin the respectability of her noble family. She struggles with the dilemma. To portray this situation in a novel both realistically shows a woman responding to the actual social ideologies of the age but *also* shows the reader that to resist temptation, as the young woman does, is the correct course of action for the reader to imitate. The conflict comes in only when the real young woman *is* seduced by the handsome boy but the novelist cannot or will not portray it. Indeed, this is the very entry point for euphemism, which allows the novelist to both write and not-write the actuality of the fallen woman. With euphemism, a writer can outwardly show what the reader *should* do and also, subtly, what the character *actually* does.

A note on terms: throughout this work, I will be examining Brontë's use of euphemism and other rhetorical strategies to express both heteronormative erotic scenes

and non-traditional sexualities. Along the same path lie gender performances and societal expectations linked to any number of things: “masculinity,” “femininity,” “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” “autoerotic,” and even the very term “sex” are all complicated terms meriting their own lengthy exploration, a project I am not prepared to undertake here. Generally, my conceptions of gender and gender performance expectations are based on historically-located nineteenth-century ideals. For example, Brontë describes typical “womanhood” in many places through her characters’ opinions, such as in *Shirley* when Robert Moore discusses femininity in Caroline Helstone with his sister Hortense: “there is about her an occasional something—a reserve, I think—which I do not quite like, because it is not sufficiently girlish and submissive; and there are glimpses of an unsettled hurry in her nature, which put me out” (58). Later, she is described as William Farren’s “ideal of a lady” in that she had a “gentle mien, step, gestures, [and] grace of person and attire” (*Shirley* 273). Furthermore, Whitney Chadwick describes Victorian womanhood as conflicted; women were managers of the home and pillars of morality, but “the middle-class ideal of femininity stigmatized many groups of women as deviant—those who remained unmarried, who worked, or were [...] social radicals” (176). Clearly, it is these marginalized forms of femininity which interested Brontë.

Masculinity can be described as just the opposite of femininity; men are (or should be) firm, opinionated, and complex while women remain ‘tranquil,’ “sedate and decorous” (*Shirley* 58). I deduce further definitions of gender expectations anecdotally from the many instructional episodes in Brontë’s novels which parallel many stereotypes

common in the Victorian period (and even still today), which will become clearer in subsequent chapters. As for my section on self-pleasure, I try to avoid using the word “masturbation,” as “autoeroticism” has deeper implications of passion, independence, and fulfillment than mere physical self-pleasure.

The terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual,” of course, did not come into wide use until the very end of the nineteenth century, and so I use twenty-first century senses of the terms to mean a person attracted to persons with the same physical sex and a person attracted to persons with the opposite physical sex, respectively. As Foucault points out, around the time Brontë was writing, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). This shifting in definition can be seen in Brontë’s novels as she explores the possibility of a generally heterosexual heroine ‘experimenting’ with homosexuality. I do not—certainly do not!—mean to say that homosexuality is a “phase.” On the contrary, I propose, using the historically appropriate shifting meaning, that Brontë’s representation of homoerotic encounters imply that homosexuality is not only limited to this new “species” of individuals, but that anyone could partake in a variety of sexual expressions.

The sliding scale that Brontë portrays in each of her characters allows each to experience a range of genders and sexualities. As an author in Victorian England, she was aware of the complicated forces at work between male and female, public and private, open speech and repression. She combines all of these seeming binaries and creates new combinations of their parts to explore and question the range available to individuals—especially women. “Rather than repressing passion, Brontë’s novels make



passion and repression similar to one another,” says Vanden Bossche in a rather Foucauldian turn of thought (52), and Kucich agrees: “passion and repression [...] generate together a desired condition of emotional destabilization; [and] repression converts this destabilization into power” (40). Indeed, Brontë takes different levels of language, gender performances, sexualities, ideologies, speech and non-speech, and writes them together to pose subtle but poignant questions about the truths society holds. Her life, filled as it was with independence and the frustration of unrequited love, shaped her work. Her work shaped the world.

### Bi-Sexual Brontë: Genders and Sexualities

Charlotte Brontë seems to have been intrigued and fascinated by the ranges of expressions available to women regarding gender performance and sexuality. She combines elements of masculinity and femininity to question their normal manifestations (or expected manifestations) and, likewise, probes sexual behaviors to expose the limits of acceptable displays. In these cases of gender and sexuality, Brontë writes in complex ways about what is permissible in two senses: first, what could be said publicly (as opposed to being repressed into silence), and second, what could be aligned with heteronormativity (as opposed to aberrant sexual practices). The results seen in her novels are euphemistic discourses on non-traditional expressions of gender and eroticism, concealed from the superficial reader by well-wrought narrative strategies.

In the next two chapters I examine the role of euphemism in Brontë’s novels *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Because of occurrences in her own life, Brontë was familiar with

illicit romances and strict social codes which bound them. Helene Moglen asserts that Brontë began thinking about these concepts even as young as thirteen, saying, “Charlotte fantasized about social and psychological interaction in a world of wits and beautiful women; about courtships and, increasingly, about seduction and adultery” (27).

Although the Angrian tales were not at the time meant for publication, Brontë was well aware of limits on what could be realistically circulated. As she grew older and said farewell to her juvenilia, she continued to explore power and sex and was dedicated to expressing complex and sometimes unwriteable emotions and events.

There are those critics, like Inga-Stina Ewbank, who situate Brontë in a rather pessimistic world of male-dominated society, full of phallocentric power and sexual repression. On the other end of things are critics such as Kathryn Bond Stockton, who, using Luce Irigaray’s theories of writing through the female body, joyfully hold Brontë up as a model of writing with feminine voice. I would like to propose a happy medium along the lines of Lynn M. Voskuil and Robyn R. Warhol’s works, which posit that there are dangers in reducing things to mere representations of male and female, freedoms of speech and repression. Instead, I agree that there are myriad ways one can present gender performance and that representing characters who are neither wholly male nor wholly female is a realistic way of creating engaging personalities. These personalities, as close to reality as Brontë could manage, are only ‘real’ insofar as they reflect modes of reality as opposed to pure ideologies perpetuated by Victorian society. Certainly, this meant that the ultimate expression of ‘womanhood’ or ‘manhood’ was nigh impossible to reach (the

definition of “ideal” prevents it), but it also meant that each character’s impulses, passions, and desires must accurately reflect real-world ranges of possibility.

Dennis W. Allen reminds us that although Brontë does new and exciting things with sexuality in the novel, she is not the first to use repression and concealment to her advantage:

*Pride and Prejudice* thus [with the elopement of Lydia] anticipates the dilemma of representing sex and sexuality in Victorian fiction. Associated with the chaotic, the sexual cannot be directly represented in the novel, yet it is impossible to ignore. Thus Austen’s rather Senecan approach to the sexual—her siting of the sexual action of the novel behind the scenes—resolves this difficulty and establishes a strategy deployed by the novels that follow *Pride and Prejudice*, namely, direct presentation of the sexual is replaced by techniques for presenting sexual material indirectly. (52)

This “indirection,” begun (in Allen’s opinion) by Austen, is the cleverly-concealed erotic euphemism brought to its full power in *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Brontë develops all forms of sexuality into broad and deep discourses hiding within her narratives, taking the strategy of “indirect” representation to new levels of complexity.

The variety of gender performances present in Brontë’s novels reiterates the question of multifarious reality versus socially acceptable representation. Brontë attempted to avoid criticism and censure, self-censoring to stay within societal norms, but she also seems to have been compelled to bury within her art a more accurate portrait of reality. She was, for example, always eager to hear critics review her work and did not shy away from negative reviews, instead taking them to heart while working on each successive novel. As Rebecca Fraser reminds us, though, “Brontë was a woman whom we know from her writing was full of passionate desires and impulses” (186). Phyllis

Bentley describes her writing as “a strange pungent mingling of wild romance and domestic realism, of cosmic poetry and local detail, quite personal and peculiar” (9).

Widely acknowledged as closely linked to the events of her life, Brontë’s works are a sort of confessional in the very Foucauldian sense—repressed urges are held in her secret heart and come pouring out through her novels. Indeed, *Jane Eyre* is even subtitled “An Autobiography,” a clear indicator of important confessional aspects linking the reader and the author.

So Brontë shows us, carefully, covertly, and through figurative language, a reality full of sex and eroticism. Her subtlety is part of her genius; as John Kucich reminds us, there is a “particular Brontëan formulation of desire that is articulated partly through repression itself” (38). Within this world of sex and eroticism, Brontë goes even further and shows us non-traditional sexualities and erotic expressions such as homoerotic encounters, transvestitism, and autoerotic delights. Brontë examines gender roles and sexuality in ways that most other Victorian writers could not or would not through euphemistic language: “her whole life’s work had been about dismissing female stereotypes. Whatever the criticisms of her work, she continued to hold that ‘*conventionality is not morality*’” (Fraser 191, emphasis mine on Brontë’s words from the preface to *Jane Eyre*). Brontë’s novels question social norms by subtly portraying a range of gender performances and sexual preferences combining and complicating masculine and feminine stereotypes.

For example, one of her more infamously dual-gendered characters, Shirley Keeldar, often refers to herself as a man, saying, “you must regard me as Captain Keeldar

to-day. This is quite a gentleman's affair" (S 229). In some instances, there is quite a sense of humor surrounding Shirley's masculinity, as Mr. Helstone plays along with her claiming the title "captain." On the evening of the attack on the mill, when Mr. Helstone asks Shirley to be "master of the Rectory" and guard over Caroline, he says, "If there should chance to be any disturbance in the night, captain, [...] what would you do?" to which Shirley playfully replies, "don't know—faint, perhaps—fall down, and have to be picked up again" (S 280). After drawing attention to the stereotypical feminine gender expectations, Shirley asks for and receives a brace of pistols, which Mr. Helstone is quick to point out is a "complement" to Shirley's masculinity (S 281). Brontë seems interested in exploring, through situations like these, the interactions between men and women, how gender is portrayed, and especially how others react to non-traditional gender performances such as Shirley's.

Although not alone in writing novels on difficult questions of gender and sexuality, Brontë was certainly not in the majority. Shirley Foster describes this conundrum, saying, "Mid-Victorian feminists (many of whom would not even have included themselves under that heading) were both cautious in challenging their society's ideologies and themselves ambivalent about female desires and goals" (8). Stockton also addresses the problem, saying that despite the difficulties (that Brontë was subjected to certain expectations and censoring, or that Brontë only unconsciously realizes the truths she writes about) these tensions are present in *Villette* (103). Foster reiterates the question of convention, saying that gender, most often presented as a dichotomy of male / female, is also discussed in Brontë as a binary of for / against: *Villette* is "an exploration

of the dualistic nature of female experience, both protest against and accession to convention” (14). This same pairing can be seen as Brontë’s struggle against the public notion that women were without sexual desires (or should be) while maintaining a place in society through “accession” to the “conventions” of modesty and self-censorship.

Through *Lucy Snowe* and *Jane Eyre*, Brontë (intentionally or unintentionally) writes in a complex view of gender and sexuality, concurrently commenting on society’s ideals of chastity and the quiet subservience of women. By participating in the masculine world of writing, Brontë is already questioning the dominant paradigm by usurping for herself *authority*. Whitney Chadwick makes an important note on women artists,<sup>9</sup> saying “the complex issue of art training for women deserves its own study, for in demanding access to art training and life classes women were not only challenging codes of feminine prosperity and sexual conduct; they were also claiming the right to see and represent actively the world around them, and to command genius as their own” (178). But in this very power-play of claiming authorship for herself, Brontë also exposes herself to the general public; Ellen Bayuk Rosenman points out that women taking on a profession “such as acting, dancing, modeling, and writing were often charged with [sexual] indecency [when] appearing in public spaces” (10). By being an author, Brontë takes a position largely unavailable to women, and by representing the multiplicity of women’s sexuality quietly in her socially acceptable stories, she writes the unwritable.

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Chadwick specifically discusses visual arts (namely painting) in her book, but many of her assertions hold true for women writers, especially regarding the pressures they experienced due to socially-imposed gender expectations.

In the Victorian period, the “woman question” was certainly prominent in some circles, and Brontë was aware of the various impulses of new thoughts about femininity. Although moving toward freer thinking on each sex’s role in society, women writers were still very limited by social expectations. Namely, women writers (if women wrote at all) were expected to write about chaste romance and moral love, those areas of domesticity being what they were supposedly most familiar with and so best able to write about authentically; indeed, it was widely believed that “the qualities which defined the artist—independence, self-reliance, competitiveness—belonged to a male sphere of influence and action” (Chadwick 177). This definition of appropriate topics for women was based largely on what Foster gently calls the “notion that there were certain innately feminine characteristics,” a reflection of social norms that restricted women to the realms of romance and domesticity (Foster 2).<sup>10</sup> During the Victorian era, it was widely held that the most successful women writers were the ones who did not push the boundaries of these limits, but instead worked within their frame (Foster 3).

Although working mainly within the bounds established by popular censors, Brontë was curious to explore the “woman question” and women’s sexuality in detail through her writing. Chris R. Vanden Bossche notes that, “in order to be, as Bakhtin puts it ‘internally persuasive,’ discourse must incorporate, in order to supplant, opposing

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<sup>10</sup> This is called the “Natural Complement theory,” and is based on biological differences between men (who are physically stronger) and women (who bear children). Over time, these differences were exploited and became visible in society through practices such as the division of labor. For a more full discussion of the theory, see Ann Ferguson’s chapter, “Androgyny as an Ideal for Human Development.”

internally persuasive discourses” (49). Brontë uses the tropes of the subordinate woman and traditional marriage to question the ideologies held within them. Fraser attributes this in some part to the influence of her obsessive love for Constantin Heger, saying “she began to come to what echoes through *Villette* as almost abstract conclusions, about the empty nature of life for women in the nineteenth century world where they [were] forced to conceal their true natures for the sake of male-imposed propriety” (192).

Additionally, the trajectories of her novels are conducive to these exploratory ends; as she uses the typical marriage plot, she adds aspects of the Romantic, the Gothic, even the fairy-tale. As Rowen Pelling says of *Jane Eyre*, “this is a world shadowed by phantasmagoria, where there is opportunity for the reader to unearth dark secrets in the attics and on the moors. What is eroticism if not the desire to embrace the hidden and the forbidden?” (52). However, her publisher, George Smith, urged her to change the ending of *Villette* to be more closely aligned with the social expectations about women’s writing (i.e. to make it more overtly romantic and fulfill the unanswered question of erotic desire in the marriage bed), but Brontë refused. Instead, she began to join the growing Victorian “appeal to realism” and distanced herself from the prevalent fixation on idealized romance and sexuality contained solely within heterosexual union (Foster 4).

Joseph Allen Boone reiterates that the relationship between intentionally questioning ideologies and the marriage plot was complicated, saying, “a rebellion against the dictates of love-plotting in the name of greater fictional realism, for instance, does not necessarily guarantee a radical move against the love-plot’s conservative sexual ideology” (18). I believe, however, that Brontë does negotiate the move toward realism



and the subtle commentary on ‘sexual ideologies’ by maintaining a surface-level plot of the traditional marriage ending. Although using the traditional marriage ending, she undermines the very trope by including non-traditional gender roles and eroticism of several types. Simply by being a female writer, Brontë was challenging the long-held stereotypes about “the male world of letters” and the idea of the financially independent woman (Boone 12). Brontë’s works do, however, focus on couples, romance, and marriages. In this way, she works with social expectations to achieve her own ends; she presents her new ideas of sexual femininity within a framework of euphemism with which readers would have been comfortable.<sup>11</sup>

Because it subscribes in part to the Victorian formula of realism and romance in women’s novels, *Villette* was, at least, not refused publication (unlike *The Professor*). The novel does include a near-perfect portrait of the ideal Victorian woman (in the figure of Paulina de Bassompierre), but many of the other characters simply fill traditional roles in order to question them. In *Villette*, Brontë was able to “see and represent the bi-sexuality present in every human being” (Beer 113). Following Patricia Beer’s use of the hyphenated “bi-sexual,” I will be using the term not to indicate a person who is attracted to members of both sexes; rather, I use the term to indicate the presence of both genders, a sort of hermaphrodite or androgyne (in Foucault’s non-essentialist sense) but more complex than either. This translation of terms is similar to the Kinsey Scale concept as

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<sup>11</sup> Boone remains skeptical, saying “this literary revolt against the *thematic* limitations imposed by the novel’s love ideology, however, rather like Thackeray’s or Brontë’s revolts in the name of greater realism, remained incomplete as long as its social criticism operated within the *structural* confines of conventional plotting” (19).

applied to gender performance instead of sexual preference, and the term bi-sexual encompasses behaviors and activities rather than physical traits. In more recent scholarship, Alan Soble asserts that flexible gender and sexual performances is the ideal expression; he says “the particular form taken by human sexual behavior will be determined primarily by social, historical and economic factors. Under the proper circumstances, persons could emerge into adulthood as practicing bisexuals” (4). Although he is using the unhyphenated “bisexual” as a person attracted to others “regardless of the sexual anatomy of their partners” (4), Soble’s dissection of the factors influencing gender performance (social, historical, and economic) are important considerations when discussing Brontë. In her novels, Brontë seems to experiment with the “circumstances” of her characters to question what Soble considers inefficient and outdated heteronormativity (32).

Following this train of thought based on flexible definitions of genders, I will examine at length the ramifications of non-traditional gender performances as they affect sexuality and possible homoerotic scenes as linked to cross-gender moments. Foucault describes a similar link: “homosexuality appeared as [...] a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul” (43). Rather than the uniting male and female into a hermaphrodite, though, here we see both male and female remaining distinct, coexisting and mingling without losing individual integrity. Warhol agrees that such “double-ness” in narrative perspective, genre, and theme operate[s] in Charlotte Brontë’s texts to subvert oppressive categories of gender and value in Victorian culture and literature” (861). By portraying a range of genders, Brontë creates a space for a similar range of

sexual preferences and sexual expressions, from typically socially accepted chaste heterosexuality to stigmatized homoerotic and autoerotic episodes.

In *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, this scale translates into each character's singular blend of sexual masculinity and femininity, often described in uniquely mixed-gender or cross-gender narration. The novels seem especially concerned with looking at women's gender performances and the ways in which they often transgress culturally sanctioned expectations regarding sexuality and the authoring thereof.

Lucy Snowe as both character and narrator in *Villette* presents the unique pairing of both subject and object, male and female, desired and desiring. By taking a spectator role as a character in her story—often watching the action, rather than taking part in it—Lucy shows her distinctly feminine side as she is unable to direct the course of her life. In narrating her own story to the reader, however, she assumes a masculine *authority*. The character Lucy participates in the unwriteable while the narrator Lucy attempts to write it, a combination of action and observation revealed in euphemism. This pair of opposites seems to mirror what Lucy calls the “life of thought and that of reality,” drawing attention to the differences between internalized and externalized identity and performance (V 85).

The two sides of portrayal are united when fiction reflects nonfiction in carefully negotiated ways. In the case of sexuality, we can easily see that the sexual “life of thought”—a life of fantasies and possibly non-standard fetishes—is hidden away under social pressures of inaction and unwritableness. This silencing of (erotic) imagination seeps through in the language of euphemism, however hidden it must remain under the

‘life of reality.’ But what does this mean for the true portrayal of life? Are novelists like Brontë doomed to either write wish-fulfilling narratives to replace reality, or suppress fantasies altogether so as to write with mundane accuracy? Brontë includes sexual undertones subtly, for to put them in broad daylight would be to invite instant criticism and failure in the increasingly commodified world of writing. Brontë connects fantasy and social reality, uniting the two with euphemism.

In *Villette*, there is a similar (if slight) disconnect between the narrator and the action of the story, just as euphemism creates a break between events and depictions. Many critics claim that Lucy’s narration is “unreliable,” but this could also be seen as a masculine assertion of the right to withhold information from the reader, a foot planted between reality and erotic fantasy.<sup>12</sup> Boone describes Lucy as “a narrator whose mental and autoerotic health depends on her refusal to be pinned down, either by possessive men or prying readers” (220). By resisting ‘being pinned down,’ Lucy-the-narrator creates a seat of power and thus a seat of pleasure for herself; Foucault describes the two sides:

[There is a] double impetus: [...] The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, [...] and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power [of monitoring], flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. [This inevitably creates] perpetual spirals of power and pleasure. (45)

This separation of voice into a ‘double impetus’ is an effective way of concealing from readers private passions and also hides scandalous acts which would be socially

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<sup>12</sup> Stockton in particular notes that there is much discussion of Brontë’s narrator, citing Janice Carlisle, Brenda R. Silver, and Karen Lawrence (123).

unacceptable. Through the persona of her narrator, Brontë self-censors. As a woman, Lucy-the-narrator is expected to be an upright moral example, telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, just as the “angel in the house” was expected to. As a subjective character in her own story, Lucy the woman could also be seen as variable and unreliable as many claim, with her own passions and desires. But as an *authority*, Lucy becomes powerful and determines what she will share with the reader. She may chose, with masculine power, what to leave out. Her ‘unreliability’ becomes an intentional way to conceal the unwritable.

In *Jane Eyre*, the narrator is not quite so often called unreliable but there are certainly places of disconnect. No, instead, *Jane Eyre* seems to more directly probe into the questions of a woman’s place in society and conventional ideologies.<sup>13</sup> Vanden Bossche reminds us that we must not take *Jane* to merely attempt to rewrite, reform, or even support social ideologies, but that those ideologies are fluid and so *Jane* has its own place in their creation and active evolution. For example, as the story opens, Jane’s time at Lowood seems to represent “submission to established cultural institutions” but Jane actively rebels while she is there—namely, by refusing Mr. Brocklehurst’s labeling her as a liar (Vanden Bossche 47). “The question,” Vanden Bossche says, “is not whether the novel supports or subverts [...] ideology, but rather how it deploys language [...] in order to confront a series of social situations, each of which threatens to delimit Jane Eyre’s

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<sup>13</sup> Vanden Bossche makes the important distinction that “saying that texts have an ideological function is not the same as saying that they contain pre-existing ideology” (48).

social agency” (47). The novel’s complicated relationship with gender and sexual norms supports, subverts, and probes women’s role in society. Brontë, not one to simplify matters, rather portrays them as complex as they really are.

To trace the elusive erotic in Brontë’s novels, I have chosen to arrange my analyses in near-chronological order, following the progression of the heroines’ experiences. Just as our two protagonists, Lucy and Jane do, a young woman might first learn about love by making close female friends and experimenting with them sexually. She might then discover newly-awakened desires and find a way to satisfy herself. Meanwhile, she is perhaps caught in Brontë’s favorite position of either student or subordinate to a love-interest teacher or master, which may finally resolve her independent nature with a socially acceptable marriage.

By structuring the project thus, I hope to prove that Brontë truly examined every facet of sexuality available to her; many different stages, partners, and types of love are present. She does this with carefully shielded language, hiding the erotic among the innocuous. Brontë uses euphemism to portray a range of performances of gender and sexuality that would have generally been considered taboo with a deftness and agility which prove her success as a writer.

## CHAPTER II

### ELUSIVE EROS OF MANY KINDS

Perhaps some languid summer day,  
 When drowsy birds sing less and less,  
 And golden fruit is ripening to excess,  
 If there's not too much sun nor too much cloud,  
 And the warm wind is neither still nor loud,  
 Perhaps my secret I may say,  
 Or you may guess.

-C. Rossetti, "Winter, My Secret"

In each of the main topics I cover in this chapter (homosexuality, autoeroticism, and the relation of sex to power), Charlotte Brontë departs from the "normal" and ventures into unknown territory to see what possibilities are available for her characters other than dissatisfying phallogentric-heteronormative marriage.

#### Hints of Homoeroticism

Brontë's interest in the range of sexual performances available to women uses the heterosexual as a jumping-off point and lands squarely on what we might now characterize as homoerotic. Her interest in questioning socially unacceptable (in this case, homosexual) relationship dynamics is evidenced by the wide variety of female couples in her novels: there are important, intimate girl-friendships in *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* of course, but there is also a significant development of the concept in *Shirley*. Close friendships between women were common in the nineteenth century, and Brontë

uses the cover of socially acceptable friendships to pursue the possibilities of female-female homoerotic relationships. The line (if there is a line) separating ‘normal’ homosocial behaviors and transgressive homoerotic desires is difficult to locate because relationships between women were entitled to a certain amount of privacy. Brontë uses this blurry distinction and difficult-to-define realm as part of a refusal to subscribe to a black-and-white worldview, evident in her treatment of these female “friendships,” which Sharon Marcus agrees range from platonic to homoerotic (29). Indeed, I use a combination of the words, “homosocial/homosexual,” as an indicator of the special problems associated with determining the nature of the bonds between women. In both *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* these bonds are readily apparent; Lucy has several bosom-friends ranging from childhood (Polly) to the *pensionnat* (Ginevra) while Jane has close girl-friendships at school (Helen and Miss Temple) and as an adult (Diana and Mary Rivers).

In *Villette*, Lucy allows a few other female characters to become intimate friends, and the language describing their relationships is distinctly euphemistic and sexual. Her two best girl-friends, Paulina and Ginevra, both follow this pattern of friendship between young women described in homosexual terms.<sup>1</sup> The first homosocial/homosexual encounter Lucy has is with the young Polly at the home of the Brettons. The two girls share a bedroom and sleep together. When Polly is distraught about leaving the Brettons’ home, Lucy comforts her. The embrace they share is described by Lucy-the-narrator in

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<sup>1</sup> Although I only examine a few primary characters here, Lucy says that during her time at the *pensionnat*, “each of the teachers in turn made me overtures of special intimacy; I tried them all” (V 139).



distinctly sexual terms of longing: “I saw the little thing shiver. ‘Come to me,’ I said, wishing, yet scarcely hoping, that she would comply [...] She was chill; I warmed her in my arms. She trembled nervously; I soothed her” (V 38). There is a strong physicality in the passage that puts the two girls side by side as possible lovers. Lucy, in this case feminized by her submissive role to the younger but more assertive Polly, gives us a glimpse of their intimacy in thoroughly eroticized language.

Their affair is continued throughout the book up until the very moment of Polly’s departure from the narrative. Each time the girls chance to meet, they greet each other with the enthusiasm of lovers: “‘Papa, there is Lucy!’ cried a musical, friendly voice, ‘Lucy, dear Lucy—*do* come here!’ I hastened to her. She threw back her veil, and stooped from her saddle to kiss me” (V 418). Lucy the narrator pays homage to Polly’s feminine charms by describing her melodic voice. Polly’s excitement on seeing Lucy defines the relationship as reciprocal; indeed, Polly exposes herself to Lucy so that they can share a kiss. These small encounters read innocently enough on the surface, but they also point to a deeper, possibly erotic connection between the two.

The relationship between Lucy and Polly is also a mirror of Lucy’s eventual love with M. Paul: *Paulina* is, of course, the feminized version of his name. Polly is portrayed as filling a similar emotional role to M. Paul, which implies that she could also fill the sexual role of a husband. Lucy describes her relationship with Polly in affectionate terms: “I liked her. It is not a declaration I have often made concerning my acquaintance, in the course of this book; the reader will bear with it for once. Intimate intercourse, close inspection, disclosed in Paulina only what was delicate, intelligent, and sincere;

therefore my regard for her lay deep” (V 419-20). The close connection between the two girls is clear. Paul is likewise described as a worthy companion full of “tendernesses” and “one grand love”: “how good he was; [...] a stainless little hero” (V 449). Her “little hero” indeed—both M. Paul and Paulina are described as petite. Lucy goes on to describe her friendship with M. Paul in much the same way that she expounds on her relationship with Paulina, saying “still I liked to hear him say so earnestly—that he was my close, true friend; I liked his modest doubts, his tender deference” (V 462).

In Brontë’s aligning Polly with Lucy’s future husband, the reader understands that the girls share a special intimacy. As Polly stands in for M. Paul, so Lucy stands in for Polly’s future husband: in a surprising portrayal of masculinity in a woman, Lucy asks Polly’s father for her hand in marriage in the place of Graham Bretton. This episode not only portrays Lucy in a man’s role, but in the place of a husband, and so she is finally able to have socially acceptable sex-in-marriage with Polly. If a woman’s ultimate expression of femininity was to become a wife, we can equate Lucy’s becoming Polly’s (place-holder) husband as the ultimate expression of her potential manhood and the culmination of their own erotic romance. Were it not for social conventions, we could easily imagine the two girls as not just standing in as husbands for each other temporarily, but as actual lifetime companions themselves.

Shortly after Lucy sets out on her lone voyage, she meets a second female love interest, Ginevra Fanshaw. Lucy, as narrator, frequently comments on Ginevra’s beauty: “how pretty she was! How charming she looked” (V 94), and later “Beautiful she looked;

so young, so fresh” (V 97).<sup>2</sup> Lucy also ‘makes love’ to Ginevra in the school play, and the language of the passage implies authentic feeling: upon discovering that Ginevra is directing her acting at Dr. Bretton, Lucy says, “I hardened my heart, rivalled and outrivalled him. I knew myself but a fop, but where *he* was outcast *I* could please. Now I know I acted as if wishful and resolute to win and conquer” (V 159). Lucy does not speak of herself as a character, she uses the first person pronoun “I” when describing her wooing of Ginevra. She herself wants to “win and conquer” Ginevra; win her as a lover and conquer her in an erotic embrace.

For her part, Ginevra often links arms with Lucy as she would a gentleman suitor, and calls her by a man’s name (most often ‘Timon’ or ‘Tim’) and begs her for compliments. Lucy also notices details about Ginevra that only a lover would; she recalls their first meeting fondly: “in *my* eyes, you will never look so pretty as you did in the gingham gown and plain straw bonnet you wore when I first saw you” and comments on her beauty, even if it is merely to condemn her vanity: “She turned me and herself around; she viewed us both on all sides; she smiled, she waved her curls, she re-touched her sash, she spread her dress, and finally, letting go my arm, and curtseying with mock respect, she said: ‘I would not be you for a kingdom’” (V 98, 165). Occasionally, though, the narrator sincerely appreciates Ginevra’s charms by describing her appearance in adoring, lavish detail: “Ginevra Fanshawe was the belle, the fairest and the gayest

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon Marcus, in examining the range of possibilities available to female friends, says that perhaps this focus on physical beauty between women was platonic and ‘normal’, despite a tendency to consider it either “an appropriation of masculine desire” between lesbians, or “hostile rivalry” between heterosexual friends (61).

present; she was selected to open the ball: very lovely she looked, very gracefully she danced, very joyously she smiled. Such scenes were her triumphs—she was the child of pleasure” (160). Lucy seems to wistfully think that this “child of pleasure” could be *her* partner in (sexual) pleasure.

Lucy and Ginevra share several tender moments that bring to mind a romantic and sexually active relationship between the girls, despite Lucy’s tendency to ‘protest too much’: “She threw herself on the bench beside me, and (a demonstration I could very well have dispensed with) cast her arms around my neck” (163). How Lucy-the-narrator joys in describing these little happenings! She mentions them so often one might think she is secretly glad for the attention. Often, the girls find themselves alone in the dormitory sharing intimate confidences, and often they are physically touching. Even in public, the two partake in secretive dalliances, as when they sneak away from the fête: “Through the garden we went—penetrated into the corridor by a quiet private entrance” (V 165). This passage especially invokes a sexualized physical relationship between the girls, with its dark, lush image of the garden (Brontë’s favorite euphemistic image of female genitalia), the implications of ‘penetration,’ ‘corridor,’ and ‘private,’ and the general trope of young lovers sneaking away from a party to partake in erotic play. The homoeroticised reading of this passage is certainly complicated by the fact that read literally, Ginevra is merely leading Lucy to get a better look at her two potential *male* lovers. The surface reading of the euphemism continues to provide Brontë with a way to shield herself from public outcry and externally-imposed censorship.

Like *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* includes Brontë's cleverly hidden hints of homosexuality. Using her theory of the "erotics of talk," Carla Kaplan posits that Jane measures all of her relationships (including the one between her as authoress/narrator and us as readers) by their discursive merits. In quick succession, Kaplan mentions Bessie, who has a "remarkable knack of narrative" and tells Jane stories as a child, Mary Ann Wilson, who also "had a turn for narrative," and especially Diana and Mary Rivers because of their ease of conversation and witty exchanges (*JE* 37, 93). To this cursory list I would add Miss Temple,<sup>3</sup> for her willingness to hear Jane's defense of herself in the face of being called deceitful and of course, Helen Burns, who, meaningfully, is the first other girl Jane's age who we hear conversing with her at Lowood. These exchanges of power via language point to the importance of the interplay between mind and body, intellect and sex. Kaplan seems to say that Brontë uses language as a pleasurable measure of relationships to point to erotic undertones in each of these cases.

Jane is perhaps first attracted to Bessie as the only person in the Reed household who is kind to her in any way. Bessie, as unmarried household help, was probably only in her early teens as the story begins. She would not have been much older than Jane (age eight at her departure for Lowood) and so a romantic, rather than maternal, connection is entirely plausible. Jane-the-narrator says, "Bessie seemed to me the best, prettiest, kindest being in the world" and that she "preferred her to any one else at Gateshead Hall" (*JE* 37). There is, indeed, a simple and adoring bond between the two,

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<sup>3</sup> Miss Temple is also notably a case of Brontë's favorite trope of love between student and teacher, which will be discussed at length in section three of this chapter.

generated perhaps by pity on the part of the servant and gratitude on the part of the little girl. This bond seems to blossom as the Gateshead section develops, though, and finally when Jane learns she is going off to school, Bessie discovers her in the garden (again, Brontë's favorite seat of female pleasure) and playfully scolds her for ambling about outside. Jane explains her reply: "I was not disposed to care much for the nurse-maid's transitory anger; and I *was* disposed to bask in her youthful lightness of heart. I just put my two arms round her, and said, 'come, Bessie! Don't scold.' The action was more frank and fearless than any I was habituated to indulge in; somehow it pleased her" (*JE* 48). Jane's appreciation for Bessie's physical 'prettiness' and her mien, her "lightness of heart," lead her to this spontaneous expression of her love for the maid, this 'indulgent' and 'pleasing' embrace.

After their conversation about Jane's impending departure for school, the two girls have a new-found appreciation for their relationship instigated by Jane's "frank and fearless" embrace of Bessie. After she imparts a bit of friendly advice to Jane and they confess that they will miss each other, Bessie says, "'I'll kiss you and welcome; bend your head down'," then Jane describes a happy, cheerful evening: "Bessie stooped; we mutually embraced, and I followed her into the house quite comforted. That afternoon lapsed in peace and harmony; and in the evening Bessie told me some of her most enchanting stories, and sung me some of her sweetest songs. Even for me life had its gleams of sunshine" (*JE* 49). The mention of Bessie's stories and songs at this particular moment lends special weight to Kaplan's "erotics of talk." Jane's youthful infatuation with another woman in the Reed household allows her a glimpse at what love can be;

after all, “human beings must love something” (*JE* 36). Each time Bessie reappears later in the novel, Jane greets her with special attention. As she is about to leave Lowood school for Thornfield, Bessie arrives just to “have a look at [Jane] before [she] was quite out of [Bessie’s] reach;” a purely social visit based on Bessie’s lingering affection for Jane, which prompts in the younger woman a gleeful greeting; Jane says, “I was embracing and kissing her rapturously” (*JE* 108, 107). Their continued affection and intimacy points to a deep romantic attachment coupled with a ‘rapturous’ sexual connection.

Helen Burns is one of the most important of Jane’s loves, the first outside her childhood home at Gateshead, who has a short but passionate place in the novel. Jane learns much at the capable hands of her “would-be soulmate”: how to endure punishment and recognize her own weaknesses (Kaplan 12). Is it too much to suppose that the girls taught each other early love as well? Helen is a passionate young woman, dedicated to God and learning, and Jane admires her passion. After a while at Lowood, Jane and Helen come to be bosom-friends, perhaps more. Jane-the-narrator describes an intimate moment between the two: “resting my head on Helen’s shoulder, I put my arms round her waist; she drew me to her, and we reposed in silence” (84). There is a physical element to the relationship, and it is certainly reciprocal.

While Helen is sick and Jane is forbidden to see her, Jane reflects on her affections for the other girl, saying, “I never tired of Helen Burns, nor ever ceased to cherish for her a sentiment of attachment as strong, tender, and respectful as any that ever animated my heart” (93). This deeply sincere language puts Helen at the very level of

passionate love on par with the love Jane later feels for Diana Rivers (for whom she harbors similarly superlative feelings). Soon, we find that Helen is terminally ill and so Jane goes to visit her, feeling that she “must embrace her before she died—must give her one last kiss” (95). Jane does go to Helen, found in Miss Temple’s inner sanctum, and the two girls lay together in a crib. Helen even asks Jane to lie beside her while she sleeps: “don’t leave me, Jane, I like to have you near me” (98). Indeed, after a loving exchange of kisses, Helen dies in Jane’s arms.

That she is kept in Miss Temple’s room rather than the sick room with other ill girls illustrates the intimate relationship between Helen and the superintendent. Perhaps Helen and Miss Temple were even more romantically attached than Jane and Helen or Jane and Miss Temple, but the three of them taken together create an interesting love triangle. Upon first seeing Miss Temple, Jane is struck by her enchanting presence, describing her with words like ‘venerable,’ ‘admirable,’ “tall, fair, and shapely,” and she asks Helen about her at the first opportunity (*JE* 58). As the three spent more time together, Jane’s admiration grew: “Miss Temple had always something of serenity in her air, of state in her mien, of refined propriety in her language, [...] something which chastened the pleasure of those who looked on her and listened to her, by a controlling sense of awe; such was my feeling now; but as to Helen Burns, I was struck with wonder” (*JE* 87). In Miss Temple’s presence, it is Helen who actually shines; perhaps because Jane was more ‘in love’ with the girl closer to her own age, or perhaps because Helen was so in love with Miss Temple that all of her best features shone in her presence:



The refreshing meal, the brilliant fire, the presence and kindness of her beloved instructress, or perhaps more than all these, something in her own unique mind, had roused her powers within her. They woke, they kindled; first, they glowed in the bright tint of her cheek, which till this hour I had never seen but pale and bloodless; then they shone in the liquid lustre of her eyes, which has suddenly acquired a beauty more singular than that of Miss Temple's—a beauty [...] of meaning, of movement, of radiance. Then her soul sat on her lips, and language flowed from what source I cannot tell. (87)

Jane's open admiration makes it clear that she loves Helen, and also draws attention to Helen's deep connection with her "beloved instructress." Jane also has a special affection for Miss Temple, as evidenced by her comparing Helen to the superintendent. Describing Helen's beauty as extraordinary, even "more singular" than Miss Temple's, is Jane's way of honoring both women. Although Helen soon dies, Jane remains committed to Miss Temple even after her time as a student is finished; she stays at Lowood precisely as long as Miss Temple is there.

Diana and Mary Rivers seem to pick up just where Miss Temple leaves off, their names indicating a continuous trend in purity. When Miss Temple marries and loses her (maiden) name, the Goddess Diana and the Virgin Mary are there to provide Jane with friendship and guidance. Between Lowood and Marsh-End, Jane is exposed to the affections of a man, and is sorely tempted by his love. She escapes with her honor though, and is rewarded by finding two perfect companions. The case of Diana and Mary illustrates Jane's dedication to finding a lover (or lovers) who is similar to her, perhaps even her mirror image.

When she first spies the Rivers sisters through the window, she says "I thought them so similar I could not tell where the old servant [...] saw the difference" (*JE* 388).

Her time at Marsh-End is marked by total harmony; she says “I liked to read what they liked to read; what they enjoyed, delighted me; what they approved, I revered” and shortly thereafter, “thought fitted thought; opinion met opinion; we coincided, in short, perfectly” (*JE* 405-6). In language that could belong to a happy lover, Jane describes their joyful life together at length, saying, “there was a reviving pleasure in this intercourse, of a kind now tasted by me for the first time—the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles” (*JE* 405). She reiterates often how well the young women get along, how similar they are, and how affectionate they feel toward each other, and often repeats the word “pleasure”—Brontë recognizes the fulfillment of desire through intellectual play and homosocial/homosexual bonds between women.

In this happy interlude, Jane bonds with both sisters but forms a special attachment to Diana. Jane describes Diana as the natural leader of their little party, somewhat more advanced in some studies and so the elected “teacher.” With Brontë’s well-established fascination with the student/teacher love pattern, which I will discuss again at length in section three of this chapter, we can surmise that there is, at minimum, a hint of romance between Diana the teacher and Jane the student. Jane readily acknowledges Diana’s dominance, and happily submits to her:

Diana had a voice toned, to my ear, like the cooing of a dove. She possessed eyes whose gaze I delighted to encounter. Her whole face seemed to me full of charm. [...] Diana looked and spoke with a certain authority; she had a will evidently. It was my nature to feel pleasure in yielding to an authority supported like hers; and to bend, where my conscience and self-respect permitted, to an active will. (399)

The language is the language of a young woman falling in love; the “cooing of a dove,” the “delight” and “pleasure” show us that Jane is fully enraptured by Diana. Just a few pages later, as Jane gets to know the sisters, her love for Diana deepens: “I was fain to sit on a stool at Diana’s feet, to rest my head on her knee [...] I liked to learn of her; I saw the part of instructress pleased and suited her; that of scholar pleased and suited me no less. Our natures dovetailed, mutual affection of the strongest kind was the result” (406). Again, the images of doves and “pleasure” result in “affection of the strongest kind,” an affection that can only be interpreted as love. Jane’s gushing enthusiasm for the situation lends it a passion that their study of German does not quite merit in itself; no indeed—there must be a special connection between teacher and pupil.

Jane continues to maintain that she wants an equal partner in life, a sister in love, and expresses this desire directly while discussing domestic happiness and hypothetical marriage with St. John: “I do not want a stranger—unsympathizing, alien, different from me. I want my kindred—those with whom I have full fellow-feeling” (449). As Kaplan points out, though, this does not mean she cannot marry a man at all; no, Rochester is actually described as “akin” to Jane, who says, “I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him” (208). The differences between Rochester and Jane are further minimized when he is feminized by his wounds after the fire at Thornfield Hall, an event which also removes the main obstacle to their marriage (namely, Bertha Mason).

If Rochester is feminized at the end of *Jane Eyre*,<sup>4</sup> Jane is truly marrying her equal in terms of gender as well as intellect and position (thanks to her inheritance). This sort of homoerotic-like union mirrors what Brontë writes into *Villette* whenever M. Paul is characterized as feminine. Their love becomes love between two women: one who performs female and the other who has female genitalia. Likewise, this complicated homosexual/heterosexual coupling could be seen as one partner who performs masculine and the other who has male genitalia. For in each case, Lucy or Jane performs masculine at times within their relationships. In *Jane Eyre*, this gender swapping is part of what makes the union work and prevents it from usurping Jane's independence; *she*, not Rochester, is the dominant figure in their relationship because of his lost eyesight and crippled figure. She becomes his caretaker, he, her patient.

Through these non-traditional gender and erotic performances, Brontë shows us the range of sexualities not openly, but through euphemistic language. To write a novel about Lucy and Paulina's love affair, or either of the strange love triangles in *Jane Eyre* would have earned Brontë the label "sensationalist" or "libertine." Rather, by showing these exchanges and relationships through shielded language and by embedding them within standard(ish) Victorian marriage plots, Brontë is published and popular with mainstream readers. She plays to common ideals and social norms while subtly including her own views on the open possibilities for expressions of gender and sexuality, hinting at the homoeroticism present in reality.

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<sup>4</sup> Rochester is also comically feminized as he plays the transgendered gypsy fortune-teller both in the second charade and as disguised in cross-dress in chapters XVIII and XIX.

After each of her heroines has experienced this option, she begins to grow and mature sexually, developing passions that still have no socially acceptable outlet. Carefully, Brontë negotiates the temptation of autoeroticism, developing Lucy and Jane as individuals at the same time as they sexually develop. Each girl grows into an independent nature, and each learns to control the power she has over herself, mastering her passions without the involvement of a partner.

#### Garden Parties: Pleasure for One

Continuing her probing search for options other than the normative Victorian marriage, Brontë moves from expression of passion for another toward a self-contained eroticism. In a clever show of euphemism, Brontë writes the ultimate unwritable deed in both *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, an act even more repressed and kept secret than homosexual attractions between women. The image of the garden and Brontë's descriptions of lush outdoor spaces operate as an extended euphemism. This strategy of indirection—using landscape to describe self-pleasure—is akin to the rhetorical usefulness of euphemism, which replaces a forbidden and unwriteable act (autoeroticism) with an acceptable one (a solitary walk through a garden).

Autoeroticism was strictly taboo, and Foucault even admits that “educators and doctors combatted children’s onanism like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated” before reaching adulthood (42). Once we are clued in to Brontë’s wordplay, though, the reader gets a glimpse of Lucy and Jane as passionate women, their desires allowing them to have a certain power over their own sexualities. It is undeniable that Lucy goes

through such a power struggle, always mastering herself and exerting self-control at nearly every instant, and this spills over into her very private sexual life (a party of just one!) Likewise, Jane struggles with clear and passionate arousal with no partner but herself.

Brontë is claiming independence and self-reliance for her heroines through autoeroticism on several levels, challenging heteronormativity in multiple ways; there is the transgression of the social taboo described above, and there is also an underlying phallocentric problem. Jacqueline Fortunata describes the conundrum: “in hypervaluing two-person sex, traditional theories reinforce the unquestioned and naïve assumption that a woman’s sexual satisfaction is dependent upon another person” the other “person” is a man, as revealed by Fortunata in subsequent paragraphs via masculine pronouns (390). So Lucy and Jane come into power two ways, once through their own command of their passions, and a second time through the rejection of the phallocentric notion that they need a man’s assistance.

Furthermore, Joseph Allen Boone suggests that the marriage plot so commonly found in nineteenth-century novels is itself erotic, with its suspenseful buildup, excitement, and final ‘climax’ in the union of marriage (72). If we take this into account, we can credibly suppose that Brontë, in the act of writing, is self-pleasuring, while Lucy and Jane as object(ive narrators) and subjects are also self-pleasuring.

There are several possible episodes of autoerotic activity surrounding Lucy, and it is easy to read much of her insistence on self-sufficiency with autoeroticism in mind. There are, however, three primary self-pleasuring passages: The Forbidden Alley, The

Fête Play, and The Opium Scene. All three have special emphasis on Lucy's isolation (privacy), her searching within herself (exploration), and her realization of inner power (passion claimed).

Lucy's trips to *l' allée défendue* are an escape for her, a private space away from the bustle of the *pensionnat* and the dormitory full of other girls. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the appeal of the lush getaway: it is "immediately associated with the illicit, with romantic passion, with every activity Madame Beck cannot control" (410). With euphemistically concealed self-pleasure in mind, consider the following description:

Where all is stone around, blank wall and hot pavement, how precious seems one shrub, how lovely an enclosed and planted spot of ground! [...] Such deep and leafy seclusion as ought to embosom a religious house [...] that old garden had its charms. On summer mornings I used to rise early, to enjoy them alone; on summer evenings, to linger solitary, to keep tryste with the rising moon, or taste one kiss of the evening breeze, or fancy rather than feel the freshness of dew descending. The turf was verdant, the gravelled walks were white [...] There was a smaller, more sequestered bower, nestled in the vines which ran all along a high and gray wall, and gathered their tendrils in a knot of beauty, and hung their clusters in loving profusion about the favoured spot where jasmine and ivy met, and married them. (118-120)

The "stone," "blank wall," and "hot pavement" describe the harsh realities of Lucy's employment at the *pensionnat*, while her "one shrub," "enclosed" is her private pleasure spot. In the following sentence, the links to the well-documented tradition of 'worshipping' a woman's sex as "religious house" are called to mind, and Lucy confesses that her "garden" has a certain appeal. To find a private moment, she must "rise early" or "linger" later into the evening; she makes time for her solitary pleasure, indicated by the

words “tryst,” “kiss,” “feel,” and “dew descending.” Lucy uses the language of the garden to describe her own “bower,” with its ‘white walks’ of alabaster skin, ‘verdant turf’ and ‘vines’ of hair, and finally the seat of pleasure, a “knot of beauty.” This “favoured spot” is the very site of ‘marriage,’ a consummated union with herself.

The lines quoted here are only a sampling of the language alluding to the erotic ‘Forbidden Alley,’ which Lucy admits she visits often, saying, “I became a frequenter of this straight and narrow path. I made myself gardener” (121). As Stockton says, “Lucy [...] not only portrays [the garden] in ways that invoke female genitals [...] she also recalls that she cleared her own space in this (genital) cleft” (148). Furthermore, when we are introduced to the alley, Lucy-the-narrator interrupts her descriptions to admire the moon and discuss her childhood—“Oh, my childhood! I had feelings”—and to describe a thunderstorm that once stirred her from her bed at the *pensionnat*. These episodes, buried as they are within the chapter of the alley, bring to mind nighttime rendezvous, youthful experimentation, and a ‘stormy’ climax which “roughly roused” Lucy; she says, “it was wet, it was wild, it was pitch-dark [...] I could not go in [to join the other girls]: too restless was the delight of staying with the wild hour, black and full of thunder, [...] the spectacle of the clouds, split and pierced by white and blinding bolts” (122-23). A riotous storm, an electrifying euphemism for autoeroticism, the imagery of ‘pierced clouds’ amidst the tumult of dark, powerful, and wild forces gives the reader a glimpse of Lucy’s own power over herself.

The second episode of Lucy’s more overt hints of self-pleasure circles around the day of the fête and the fête play. Throughout most of the chapter, the rest of the



*pensionnat*'s inhabitants are gleefully preparing for the festivities while Lucy alone seeks solitude. M. Paul then enforces isolation on her when he locks her in the attic to learn the lines for her foppish role in the school's production. Lucy says, "I knew that the house and garden were thronged, and that all was gay and glad below; here [in the attic] it began to grow dusk; the beetles were fading from my sight; I trembled lest they should steal on me a march, mount my throne unseen, and unsuspected, invade my skirts" (V 153). Granted her wish for solitude, Lucy's worry is that now, something other than herself should "invade [her] skirts." Perhaps this is Lucy's wider commentary on her housemates: they are swarming insects below; she is fearful that they should invade her solitude, "mount" her "throne" and become her intimate associates. Although not specifically about Lucy's own autoeroticism, when read this way, the passage points to her dread of erotic intercourse with anyone but herself.

The *fête* play, with its embedded performative aspects, also begs for close inspection. Just before taking the stage as her dual-gendered character (woman's dress, man's accessories; woman actor, male role), Lucy says, "[M. Paul] recommended each to penetrate herself well with a sense of her personal insignificance. God knows, I thought this advice superfluous for some of us" (V 158). M. Paul's occasional emphasis on Lucy's *amour-propre* could be her reason for scoffing at his advice to grasp a 'sense of personal insignificance.' On the other hand, Lucy may be admitting that she is quite familiar with "penetrating" herself. Indeed, after the closing of the play, she says, "I played [the role] with relish. What I felt that night, and what I did, I no more expected to feel and do, than to be lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven. Cold, reluctant,

apprehensive, I had accepted a part to please another: ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself” (V 159). Just like the performer Vashti, she finds a self-empowering erotic moment on the stage. Initially aiming only to do M. Paul a favor, Lucy takes control of the moment and ‘pleases herself.’

A third and final episode of autoerotic euphemism occurs while Lucy is drugged by Mme. Beck and wanders about the city. Harkening back to her affinity for the garden imagery of the Forbidden Alley, Brontë again directs Lucy to sexual experimentation in a park. Perhaps the strongest of all episodes, this image of Lucy’s self-pleasure is dominated by language of intent and a struggle for power over self and sexual desire. Consider Lucy’s initial impulses:

[Imagination] brought upon me a strange vision of Villette at midnight. Especially she showed the park, the summer-park, with its long alleys all silent, lone and safe; among these lay a huge stone-basin—that basin I knew, and beside which I had often stood—deep-set in the tree-shadows, brimming with cool water, clear, with a green, leafy, rushy bed. What of all this? The park-gates were shut up, locked, sentinelled; the place could not be entered.

Could it not? A point worth considering [...] The other day, in walking past, I had seen [...] a gap in the paling [...]: I saw now this gap again in recollection—saw it very plainly—the narrow, irregular aperture visible between the stems of the lindens [...]. A man could not have made his way through that aperture, [...] but I thought I might. I fancied I should like to try, and once within, at this hour the whole park would be mine—the moonlight, midnight park! (507)

Her desire, in this strange state of opium-addled intoxication, is to visit another form of her Forbidden Alley, to visit a familiar basin, “brimming with cool water” and surrounded by the ‘verdant turf’ of *l’ allée défendue*. The imagery of the intimate vessel full of tempting ‘water’ is combined with several cases of long entryways, corridor-like places Lucy must traverse to get to her destination: the “long alleys” of the park itself and

the “narrow, irregular” gap lead to the object of her desires. She is determined to reach the seat of pleasure.

Because Lucy is drugged during this quest for erotic fulfillment, the scene is erratically narrated and gives a kaleidoscopic view of her journey to and through the park. (One could even argue that, introduced with Imagination personified as it is, the entire episode is in Lucy’s mind.) The fantastic qualities of her ramblings lend an air of delayed pleasure to Lucy’s autoeroticism. There is a delay when she discovers there is a festival being held in the park, and another delay as she is seated near the Brettons and Bassompierres and fears discovery—for she continues to value her solitary journey to fulfillment, one unassisted by even the best of friends. Finally, tension begins to build; the moment is upon her when she discovers Mme. Beck’s small party of familiar faces. When M. Paul, the object of her fantasies, appears, the scene ‘climaxes’ and Lucy describes an orgasmic response. She confesses, “I clasped my hands very hard, and I drew my breath very deep; I held in the cry, I devoured the ejaculation” (523). Her erotic relief and joy at his appearance are tempered by the narrative implications which hide the most obvious reading of autoerotic fantasizing; the euphemistic use of the garden during a moment of crucial plot movement hides the sexual nature of the episode.

M. Paul, cherished and admired, is not technically Lucy’s equal, mirror, or twin: if he were, she would still be performing a sort of autoeroticism. Stockton even goes so far as to imply that with M. Paul’s death, he assures that her only way of intercourse with him is via autoerotic fantasy, her only way of pleasure via herself, and that he clears the way for her “labors” by providing for her a school of her own, saying “autoeroticism *is*

the labor, the labor of desire, with which Paul entrusted Lucy. Suspended in stewardship, she took Paul's place as her lover (she's now a lover to herself) as well as his place as 'owner' of her school" (162). Stockton elaborates by saying that there is an "'articulation between autoeroticism and heteroeroticism' that Brontë's life and novels fashion from extraordinary loss, exorbitant privation. These autoerotic intimations are theologically linked to advent, to crucifixion, even to apocalyptic consummation," which we can easily see in Lucy's constant denial of comforts to herself, the 'apocalyptic' revelations in the park, and the death of Paul *Emmanuel* (130).

Autoerotic even when in a heterosexual relationship, Lucy embodies self-love as beyond mere physical pleasure and links it to independence. Similarly, Jane Eyre is a perfect figure for the self-sufficient woman and lover of herself. Brontë also uses the garden as the site of auto-sexual discovery in *Jane Eyre*—not quite as fluently as in *Villette*, but perhaps as an exploratory experiment to see if the maneuver would work in the context of a novel. *Jane*, of course, came before Lucy.

When Jane first arrives at Lowood school, Brontë presents the first of several autoerotic gardens to the reader. The school grounds are thus described: "The garden was a wide inclosure, surrounded with walls so high as to exclude every glimpse of prospect. A covered verandah ran down on one side, and broad walks bordered a middle space, divided into scores of little beds. These beds were assigned as gardens for the pupils to cultivate, and each bed had an owner" (59). This image of another genital cleft, "surrounded" by walls, puts the emphasis on the "middle space." In the center of these erotic gardens are "beds"—flower beds, we must assume on the surface reading, but also

beds of pleasure, beds as the space in which sexual activities occur. That each bed has an “owner” signals the careful and private tending of the space; it is not communal or shared, but individual.

The next time we glimpse Jane seeking solitary satisfaction is in fact the very evening she meets Rochester—indeed, he interrupts her lonesome pleasures. Jane describes her walk:

The ground was hard, the air was still, my road was lonely; I walked fast till I got warm, and then I walked slowly to enjoy and analyze the species of pleasure brooding for me in the hour and situation. [...] I was a mile from Thornfield, in a lane noted for wild roses in summer, for nuts and blackberries in autumn, and even now possessing a few coral treasures in hips and haws; but whose best winter delight lay in its utter solitude and leafless repose. (132)

Beginning with a warm-up, Jane soon settles into a soft, slow pleasurable pace of self-satisfaction. Her lonely lane is a treasure trove of natural delights: “roses,” commonly symbolizing passion, can be found there in the “summer” of Jane’s life; as a young woman she can find their red, luscious blossoms and access their passion. In autumn, or Jane’s mid-life, nuts and blackberries, ‘fruits’ of the bush and vine, can be found; by the end of the novel, Jane does bear “fruit.” This is clearly her own lane, individual, personal, and private. As she walks down the path to self-pleasure, she finds “coral treasures” (not unlike a ‘pearl’ in its sea-imagery) suggestive of the clitoris, which Jane enjoys in “utter solitude.”

This reading, hidden as it is in euphemistic language, is innocuous on the surface but clearly indicates autoerotic pleasures when read with an eye for key words and indicators. Brontë, with her incredibly specialized writing process of trances and tiny

script, would have carefully chosen phrases and words; she did not write with wild abandon. This passage partakes especially in double-meaning when we realize that it is at the moment of self-pleasure when Jane first meets Rochester, knocks him off *his* seat of “passion” (as his horse, Mesrour, symbolized) and then helps him recover from his fall and return to his perch. She is interrupted in an act of independent (autoerotic) power, just as he interrupts her independent (social) position again later in his marriage proposals.<sup>5</sup>

A mirror-writing of this scene is reenacted in chapter XXIII, just before another pivotal moment, the episode of their encounter in the orchard. Although it turns into heteroerotic euphemism, it begins as autoerotic. Jane enters the orchard alone, and indeed, attempts to dodge an encounter with Rochester twice. She smells his cigar and heads in the opposite direction:

I went apart into the orchard. No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like. It was full of trees; it bloomed with flowers. [...] A winding walk, bordered with laurels and terminating in a giant horse-chestnut, circled at the base by a seat, led down to the fence. Here one could wander unseen. While such honeydew fell, such silence reigned, such gloaming gathered, I felt as if I could haunt such shade forever. (291)

The lush, verdant picture Jane gives us of her solitary spot is combined with the same image of a long “winding walk,” as in Brontë’s other gardens, to be traversed. The horse-chestnut at the base of the walk is a large, phallic object, again referencing a horse; it is perhaps a symbol of Rochester’s impending interruption. But in the meantime,

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss Jane’s relationship with Rochester as related to her independence at more length in chapter three.

“honeydew fell” and “silence reigned”—she would be content to stay and pleasure herself forever.

Both Lucy and Jane have secretive solitary trysts in their gardens, enjoying the dripping dew, luscious flowers, and long paths to secluded spots. Privacy was a key element, and both girls, with their independent natures, cherish being alone to revel in their erotic powers. By taking control of their own sexual needs, Lucy and Jane also assert that they can control other areas of their lives. Brontë conveys these subtle messages of autoerotic power via euphemism, and especially joys in the image of the passionate garden.

The journey Lucy and Jane take from youthful homoerotic experiences through the gardens of self-discovery are pleasurable, no doubt. But Brontë continuously returns to heterosexual relationships, if only to question their particular gender dynamics. As M. Paul “courts” Lucy (if you can call it a ‘courtship’) and as Rochester courts Jane, both women contend with issues of power and dominance. Their independent natures and abilities to take care of their own sexual needs are now explored as compared to *men*. However, Brontë continues her questioning train, hiding new elements of the erotic in euphemism and narrative strategies that examine power between masculinity and femininity, never satisfied to merely portray what was socially acceptable or expected.

### The Love and Power Game

As Brontë’s leading ladies in *Villette*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Shirley* move from the discovery of sexuality with their early girl friends and lovers to their own grasp of private

passion, they come into a self-sufficient realization of power. Their independence is encapsulated in their autoerotic behaviors. When they move beyond their self-pleasuring and find themselves interested in pursuing heterosexual relationships, both Lucy and Jane are fascinated with the interplay between teacher and pupil or master and governess; each woman tests her newfound sexual powers by entering relationships with interesting and erotically-charged dynamics.

Brontë would not have been unfamiliar with these concepts of love and power; Helene Moglen describes her juvenilia as including indications that “Charlotte became obsessed with the implications of sexual domination” (27). Furthermore, it is fairly well documented and widely accepted that she fell in love with Constantin Heger while studying under him in Brussels. Rebecca Fraser sets up the equation for us: “of course if one was a scientist hypothesizing what the outcome of an experiment would be if one took a brilliant teacher and a passionate pupil, one might predict that the pupil would fall in love with the teacher” (190). And indeed, Brontë returned to England obsessed with thoughts of Heger. This inspired in her, for many years, a fascination with the student/teacher romance story, which she uses in *The Professor* and *Villette*, and reinterprets as a governess (or tutor)/master (or mistress) romance in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*.

Perhaps because Heger’s tutelage was the most extensive she had ever received, she looked on him as her “Master of Literature” and gave him much credit for the formation of her writing abilities (Fraser 189). Fraser points out that Heger appears in many of Brontë’s novels, however indirectly, but that his ‘biggest role’ was in *Jane Eyre*:



“Monsieur Heger, who was charismatic and distinguished but still a provincial schoolteacher, was fused with Charlotte’s Byronic alter ego Zamorna [of her Angrian juvenilia] that she had worshipped for so long. Mr. Rochester was born” (190). Even beyond *Jane Eyre*, Brontë’s “obvious sexual admiration and desire” for Heger influenced each of her novels in turn, and he shaped M. Paul, the romance between William Crimsworth and Frances Henri, and even the cross-class relationships of *Shirley* (Bentley 33).

Before examining the specific power relationships Brontë writes for her characters, I must mention Helene Moglen’s conception of the couples because of its unique contribution to the conversation surrounding power relations in romance. She says, “the relationships described are conventionally sadomasochistic. The male is possessive, tyrannical, capable of casual, defensive cruelty. The woman is submissive, adoring, disinterested: deriving pleasure from the pain of unequal attachment” (50). Moglen is specifically speaking of the relationships in Brontë’s later Angrian tales (especially regarding Zamorna) but the concept can easily be applied to her later novels as well. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane takes pleasure in serving Rochester; in *Shirley*, Caroline pines away after Robert Moore for much of the novel and in *Villette*, of course, Lucy takes much abuse from M. Paul. Moglen’s strongest argument comes when she pairs Jane with St. John, saying, “there is an enormous contradiction in his attitude toward her. He does not want to see her as a woman. He would, in fact, have her deny her sexual nature, her feelings, her body—subordinate that which is most vital in herself to his own spiritual quest. Her passivity and masochism respond to him” (137). Jane does almost submit

against her better judgment to his plans to travel to India, but takes no joy in the prospect; therefore there is no sadomasochism on her part, only insensitivity on the part of St. John.

The women of Angria, overall, seem much less independent and capable than their later counterparts. Jane and Lucy (as well as Shirley Keeldar, in a different sense) seem to wield power as often as they are suppressed by it (see, for example, my discussion below about Jane and Rochester's first engagement). Furthermore, Brontë takes care to compromise her male characters sufficiently so as to equalize each pair (which I will discuss further in the next chapter). Discussing *Jane Eyre*, Moglen agrees that the women of Brontë's novels are not entirely submissive: "she [Brontë] insisted that it was *morally* desirable to establish her heroine on the same terms as the traditional hero—by virtue of her interiority: her qualities of mind, character, and personality" (106). So we can see that although Moglen's sadomasochistic ideas seem valid in a certain light, there are figures and instances which don't seem to fit. I believe Brontë was much more interested in toying with different power structures than portraying just one, although the roles of master/servant and teacher/pupil hold special interest for her.

In the last section, I left M. Paul as mere autoerotic enabler at the end of *Villette*, but he can also be viewed as a clear case of the student/teacher romance story. Aside from her own personal experience, Brontë was interested in this student/teacher pairing as a look at the "love-and-power game" (Ewbank 199). In support of this theory, Ewbank points out a curious coincidence: that for Lucy and M. Paul, their relationship in the classroom allows the pair to get to know each other, but their romantic attraction does

not develop until he begins to directly tutor her—perhaps his stick of chalk took on new meaning for her (201).

Throughout the novel, M. Paul acts much more like an established superior than a suitor, criticizing Lucy's *amour-propre*, which Stockton calls "sexist to an extreme," a term that also characterizes Frances Henri in *The Professor* and several characters in *Shirley* (137). Brontë presents M. Paul as embodying masculinism run amok: probably homophobic, staunchly heterosexual, and entirely chaste. He censors what Lucy looks at (in criticizing her observation of the Cleopatra painting), reads (in tearing out 'inappropriate' pages from the books he lends her) and so on. He has what Stockton aptly names "phallic thunder" (138). He represents the forces in society which vehemently dislike ideological transgressions, the very forces which require Brontë to use euphemism to avoid censure. Why, then, does Brontë pair her protagonist with him? As Foster says, "Brontë rewards her heroine with a union in which she finds emotional satisfaction but does not lose her identity" (92). Lucy appreciates that he holds her to such high standards because it seems to prove that he considers her 'worthy,' that her powers and passions are the same as his. John Kucich describes M. Paul as closely aligned with a typical Brontëan protagonist, repressed, contradictory, and possessing a "tortured inwardness" that reflects Lucy's own self (74). The delicate balance of "emotional satisfaction" and identity is important in *Villette* because although Brontë presents Lucy with both, the ambiguous ending prevents the two from being forced totally to merge. Brontë maintains the contradictions by leaving the reader with the sense of possibility instead of truncated closure (Foster 106-07). Brontë writes, "drowning and

matrimony are the fearful alternatives,” implying that either definite ending would be equally unsatisfactory (as quoted by Ewbank, 202).

In a similar way, Lucy also sets her eyes for a time on an older woman-teacher: Madame Beck, harkening back to Brontë’s explorations of homoeroticism explored above. Lucy leaves no room for doubt when she describes her feelings for Mme. Beck, saying “I will not deny that it was with a secret glee I watched her. Had I been a gentleman, I believe Madame would have found favor in my eyes” (V 131). Imagining herself as a gentleman only serves to highlight the fact that she is *not* a gentleman and that the lusty attraction she feels for Mme. Beck is homoerotic. This contrast also draws attention to the many times she *does* act like “a gentleman” despite her womanhood, as when she resolutely refuses to trade Graham her cigar box for his head-dress.

Shirley, who I have already discussed as having noteworthy episodes of dual-gender like Lucy, also has an important teacher/pupil romance with her tutor Louis Moore. Like Lucy and M. Paul, the couple becomes intimate after time spent in study. The power balance, like the one between Jane and Rochester I discuss below, swings wildly from teacher to pupil and back again. Louis describes Shirley in his journal: “I worship her perfections; but it is her faults, or at least her foibles, that bring her near to me [...] these faults are the steps by which I mount to ascendancy over her” (S 437). Clearly, he sees Shirley as superior to him in many ways, but appreciates that he has the opportunity to ‘master’ her as well. He describes the ways in which he takes pleasure in serving her, and how he appreciates putting his faculties to her use, similar to the ways in which Jane assures Rochester that she enjoys submitting to his mastery (S 438).

So, we can see just as M. Paul is enchanted by Lucy and Rochester by Jane, Louis is under Shirley's spell. But also like M. Paul and Rochester, Louis enjoys wielding the power of the relationship as well: Shirley insists throughout the novel that she simply will not take a husband who cannot master her properly; after refusing Sir Philip Nunnely, she says, "I know full well, any man who wishes to live in decent comfort with me as a husband must be able to control me" (S 461). When the two are finally brought together in the confessional school-room episode, Louis recognizes that "her Gold and her Station are two griffins, that guard her on each side" (S 515), but that he also knows that he has "tamed the lioness" and that he is "her keeper" (S 512). Just as both Jane and Lucy (and even Frances Henri in *The Professor*) insist on calling their lovers by their dominant titles, Shirley and Louis exchange meaningful words immediately before he professes his love for her. Louis says, "my pupil" and "'my master,' was the low answer" (S 521). Louis calls Shirley his "pupil [and] sovereign," indicating both the dominant and submissive roles for the two of them in the relationship.

Louis is Tartar, Shirley's dog, while she is described as a wild lioness or leopardess who he has tamed (S 522-23). They 'master' each other continuously, creating overall balance that Brontë portrays as the ultimate in happy marriages. In including these power relationships in each of her novels, Brontë reveals her fascination with the shifting roles of dominance and submission in love. By probing each instance of teacher/pupil or master/servant love, we can see underlying issues related to women's rights to a marriage of equals, changing gender performance expectations, and even the struggle to find passion and the erotic via courtship power struggles.

Brontë's most famous 'love-and-power' pair, which also examines many aspects of gender and sexuality, is obviously Jane Eyre and her 'Master.' Their interchange of power and passion starts from the moment they meet, when Rochester is thrown from his horse and requires Jane's assistance to re-mount. Rochester's humbling fall and (temporary) physical disability allow Jane to assume a position of power. As soon as they are placed within the space of society—Mr. Rochester's family seat inside Thornfield Hall—he takes command. It is only within the wild, fairy-land night that Jane can be dominant for now.

Jane's dedication to Rochester begins early; she is uneasy at Thornfield Hall until she learns that Mrs. Fairfax is not indeed the true mistress of the household, and that there is a Master of the property. When Rochester makes his first appearance, Jane reflects, "Thornfield Hall was a changed place [...] it had a master; for my part, I liked it better" (*JE* 141). "With his broad and jetty eyebrows, [and] his square forehead," Rochester is the stern, 'Vulcan'-like ruler of his realm (*JE* 143, 511). Rochester himself even quickly realizes how the new governess affects his perceptions of the power structure in his household, saying to Jane, "go into the library—I mean, if you please. (Excuse my tone of command; I am used to say 'Do this,' and it is done; I cannot alter my customary habits for one new inmate)" (*JE* 148). Jane is easily mastered and happily obeys. It seems that she would agree with Shirley Keeldar when Shirley says, "nothing ever charms me more than when I meet my superior—one who makes me sincerely feel that he is my superior" (*S* 184). Later, when Jane returns from her dreary death-bed visit to Gateshead, she reflects on her joy at returning to Thornfield Hall and realizes that she is

beyond her own control, saying, “every nerve I have is unstrung; for a moment I am beyond my own mastery” (*JE* 285). Of course, for she is under *Rochester’s* “mastery”!

Through her obedience to Rochester, Jane finds a solid companion, a partner for conversation, and she acts as a confidante for him. She often meditates on her “master’s manner” toward herself, finding that she is pleased by his frank confessions, which Foucault would agree gives Jane a certain power over him (*JE* 174). Their conversations build a strong connection, but one still dominated by his role as superior and her role as governess. Just as Brontë probably interacted with Heger, Jane shows joy at the prospect of being useful to her master, which Rochester recognizes and admires: Jane says to him, “I like to serve you, sir, and to obey you in all that is right” to which Rochester replies, “Precisely; I see you do. I see genuine contentment in your gait and mien, your eye and face, when you are helping me and pleasing me—working for me, and with me” (*JE* 255). This episode encapsulates the general themes of their relationship, based on their roles as master and governess but moving beyond to a respectful, deep love. This is one of the first conversations foreshadowing that Jane, however much she obeys, will not stand for anything beyond what is “right.” Rochester’s speech goes on to foreshadow their eventual marriage and exchange of power, as he says, “well, you, too, have a power over me, and may injure me: yet I dare not show you where I am vulnerable, lest, faithful and friendly as you are, you should transfix me at once” (*JE* 255). “Transfix” is an especially appropriate term here, as Jane is often portrayed as a bewitching fairy or sprite with “power over” Rochester.

Their love, then, is a delicately balanced power play, with both Jane and Rochester holding certain control over the other. Although Rochester is the master and Jane the servant, he falls for her charms. She respects and obeys him, but she also has power over his heart. During their first engagement, she even toys with his emotions, coyly playing with her newfound influence and whipping Rochester's passions into a fury:

The system thus entered on, I pursued during the whole season of probation; and with the best success. He was kept, to be sure, rather cross and crusty; but on the whole I could see he was excellently entertained; and that a lamblike submission and turtle-dove sensibility, while fostering his despotism more, would have pleased his judgment, satisfied his common-sense, and even suited his taste, less. (319-20)

The obvious sexual tension and frustrations left without an outlet build up in Rochester and Jane alike; their playful courtship is a see-saw act of power: sometimes the one is on top, sometimes the other. Even within a single conversation (the day after the orchard confession of love and proposal) their shifting power balance is seen. Although Jane protests against Rochester's urge to dress her finely and give her jewels, Rochester waxes poetic about his visions of "put[ting] the diamond chain round [her] neck" and "clasp[ing] the bracelets on [her] fine wrists," both images of confinement and restriction. Just moments later, though, Rochester confesses, "I have never met your likeness, Jane; you please me, and *you master me*" (*JE* 303, 305 emphasis mine). Rochester again uses open imagery of imprisonment as Jane continues her playful insistence on keeping at an arm's length during this engagement, saying, "it is your time, now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently; and when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold I'll just—



figuratively speaking—attach you to a chain” (*JE* 316). This back-and-forth merely emphasizes Brontë’s fascination with the delicate balance of powers and passions between lovers and the relations between dominance and submission as well as underlying eroticism.

Up until this point, Jane has been performing mostly feminine, especially in that she is always subservient to her ‘Master.’ When he challenges her personal morals though, and the realm of social ideologies enters the plot directly, Jane must assert herself and perform masculine by making the choice to not stay with Rochester. By setting out on her own, alone, to make a living and forge a new path in the world, Jane is following a trajectory usually reserved for young men. Jane’s (masculine) inheritance is another factor that helps the eventual wedding with Rochester to be more evenly-matched, along with his feminizing wounds, as I will discuss further in the next chapter.

In the case of St. John, a similar transformation takes place. While Jane remains unthreatened by the overt dominance of a husband, she performs feminine. This is especially evident in the case of her learning Hindustanee; she says “I, like a fool, never thought of resisting him—I could not resist him”; it seems that St. John has a bit of M. Paul’s “phallic thunder” (*JE* 463). In this case particularly, not only is St. John a commanding and master-like presence, but he is morphed into the teacher figure which so fascinated Brontë. The author confounds the two roles of ‘master’ and ‘teacher’, linking them together in the figure of St. John, as Jane says, “I found him a very patient, very forbearing, and yet an exacting *master* [...] But I did not love my *servitude*; I wished, many a time, he had continued to neglect me” (461 emphasis mine). Although Jane joys

in serving Rochester, she does not love St. John and so cannot happily obey him. This link between love and submission was meaningful to Brontë especially, but on a broader level was an issue facing women of the nineteenth century. In the figure of Jane, Brontë questions how far submission should go: her independent heroine obeys only so long as her master is moral and loving.

Although she follows his instruction in Hindustanee, as soon as St. John speaks of his intent to fully dominate Jane in wedlock, she rebels. She describes her own gendered thoughts, saying, “I have a woman’s heart, but not where you are concerned; for you I have only a comrade’s constancy, a fellow-soldier’s frankness, fidelity, *fraternity*, if you like; a neophyte’s respect and submission to *his* hierophant; nothing more” (*JE* 472, emphasis used in Warhol 869). Although Jane continues to use the language of the dominant and submissive roles, she is asserting her own power by resisting the joining of the two into a wedded pair, reinforcing the power issues by overtly characterizing herself as masculine. Indeed, she is willing to *accompany* St. John in his travels to India, but staunchly refuses to marry him and *obey* him as subservient wife because of the distinct and obvious lack of romantic love between them manifested in Jane’s absolute abhorrence at the thought of sexual intercourse with St. John despite his power over her.

Power, love, and sex are thus essentially linked. By writing relationships in terms of power and exchanges of ‘mastery,’ Brontë portrays the underlying sexual tensions present in power relations, especially as related to gender. ‘Dominant’ and ‘submissive’ sexual roles parallel those roles within the master/servant or teacher/student relationships, building erotic passion into the story subtly. They also stereotypically characterize men

and women in patriarchal Victorian society. If the position of submissive housewife is the only socially acceptable end, can Lucy and Jane possibly be happy in marriage? As Caroline Helstone asks in *Shirley*, “Does virtue lie in abnegation of self?” (149).<sup>6</sup> The Victorian plot demands it, and yet Brontë could not bear to impose such a sentence on her independent heroines. Instead, she builds on the range of sexualities and her examination of the “woman question” to create a compromise for both characters.

As Lucy and Jane move toward marriage, Brontë has the task of creating a reasonably satisfying match for her protagonists. For Lucy, he is a man who respects her intellect and her goals to continue working after their marriage, and who, incidentally, is lost at sea. For Jane, he is a man who is passionately in love with her and who, incidentally, is handicapped. Although both girls are seemingly (sodomasochistically?) dominated by husbands, Brontë does her best to reconcile their independent natures with men who deserve them and actually do not dominate them fully. Brontë subliminally rewrites the Victorian marriage plot to suit herself: the power balance in each couple ends up being near-even.

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<sup>6</sup> She tellingly answers her own question immediately: “I do not believe it” (S 149).

### CHAPTER III

#### THE INDEPENDENT WOMAN AND HETERONORMATIVE LOVE

“Nay: women is to take their husbands’ opinion, both in politics and religion: it’s wholesomest for them.”

“Oh! oh!” exclaimed both Shirley and Caroline.

“To be sure; no doubt on’t,” persisted the stubborn overlooker.

“Consider yourself groaned down, and cried shame over, for such a stupid observation,” said Miss Keeldar.

...

“Man of prejudice, good-bye.”

- C. Brontë, *Shirley*

Through early girl-friendships, homosexual experimentation, autoerotic episodes, and finally the master/servant or teacher/pupil relationship, Lucy and Jane have both come to settle in a place of heteronormativity, the only socially admissible end for Victorian women. Brontë’s quiet assertions of underlying ranges of sexuality have followed each stage, and will now perhaps grow stronger since sex in marriage was not only acceptable, but expected by society.

Brontë’s explorations of nonstandard sexualities, from homoerotic to autoerotic and finally to gendered power dynamics, are all executed within the traditional Victorian marriage plot. Each plays an innocent role—female friendship, the enjoyment of solitude and the development of independence, and finally the happy submission to a (male) lover—but each also allows Brontë to secretly question possible sexual expressions and the end product of Victorian marriage. She could not openly question heteronormative

roles because of censorship in publishing and social pressures, but her masterful use of euphemism and language allow her to develop those questions in disguise. Despite their carefully-matched marriages, Brontë's protagonists do not give up their single lives easily, as each is a thoroughly 'independent woman.' First, we must establish how the girls view heteronormativity and how the novels propagate social norms so that we may then see how Brontë questions these norms.

In *Villette*, Lucy, Paulina, and Ginevra first learn a lady's prescribed role within the rigid structure of Victorian social norms; gender roles at this time were perpetuated by parents (or, in Lucy's case, guardians) during a girl's upbringing and continually enforced by social interactions. Indeed, the home was the beginning of a child's education about and in sexuality as well, for "the family cell [...] made it possible for the main elements of the deployment of sexuality [...] to develop along its two primary dimensions: the husband-wife axis and the parents-children axis [...] its role is to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support" (Foucault 108). Sexualities and gender roles were described as simply 'characteristics' of each sex, determined by upbringing and influenced by parents, teachers, and priests; women ideally held the roles of wife and mother because those roles supposedly fit best with her particular inherent skill set or "nature" (Foster 5).

Lucy learns her role very quickly at the hands of Mrs. Bretton, and little Polly is the perfectly domesticated lady already at age six. Stockton attributes this to Polly's parrot-like nature, which allowed her to mimic everyone around her (124). Society relies heavily on such 'parroting' as a form of self-replication, as each new generation is taught

how to behave primarily by imitation. Although there are no specifically negative consequences, Brontë seems to ridicule Polly's mindless obedience as a way to say that women should not accept the sexual repression all too often forced on them by society without testing its boundaries as Brontë herself does. The author describes these conformist women as "pattern young ladies, in pattern attire, with pattern deportment" and struggles to make space for her less-traditional characters outside these 'patterns' (S 327). She writes through loopholes of sexuality, using euphemism to both write and draw attention to the missing unwritten non-traditional sexualities and gender roles.

Ginevra, like Polly, falls prey to the pressures of society that required a husband to validate a woman's own life. As Foster says, "all [her] training [was] directed to the art of catching one" (7). The majority of scenes including Ginevra are directed toward this goal. Her clothes and accessories are described in detail as an important part of her person, an outward sign of her maidenhood and availability. She pursues Graham Bretton and Alfred de Hamal incessantly, and when they are not present in person, she is pestering Lucy about them. She clearly has young, blossoming sexual desires, and directs them toward what society determined was the only acceptable way of fulfilling such desires: sex in marriage.

Likewise for Jane in *Jane Eyre*. Orphaned early in life, she is repressed by the harsh Aunt Reed, and the conditions at Lowood school are specifically intended to humble students. Jane is being prepared to take a submissive role in society: she is trained to obey without question, to have modest aspirations, to work diligently for little. In this part of her life, everyone around her reinforces repeatedly that women can amount

to very little on their own; a woman's options for making an independent living were essentially limited to working as a teacher or governess. The only out presented, as evidenced in Miss Temple's case, was to marry and escape total drudgery by submitting to a husband.

Despite their education in the Victorian traditions of love and marriage, Lucy and Jane choose a different course, one of difficult but satisfying solitary self-sufficiency. This immediately sets them apart from the conventional woman. Taking a job and delaying romance were not altogether uncommon for middle class women at the time (Brontë herself followed this path), and Lucy and Jane both hold distinctly gendered jobs of caretaker/companion, governess, and/or school teacher. The combination of masculine independence and a womanly occupation do not make them gender-neutral though. Instead, the girls are portrayed as *both* genders, more masculine at particular times, and more feminine at others.

Both Lucy and Jane eventually do submit to marriage, but both cases are under special circumstances carefully negotiated by Brontë so as to not undermine their carefully sculpted independence, and each allows room for the girls' past homosexual encounters to not be erased or superseded, merely added to. Lucy has a heterosexual relationship with her fiancé M. Paul, and it is abundantly clear that, for a time, she is romantically interested in Graham. She admires Graham's "good, gallant heart" and his "kind nature" and spends a good deal of time musing on "[her] warm affection for him; [her] faith in his excellence; [her] delight in his grace" (V 254, 409). She realizes, though, that they can never be lovers, saying to herself "Good-night, Dr. John; you are

good, you are beautiful; but you are not mine” (V 410). Lucy-as-narrator may be downplaying her interest in heterosexual relationships as a form of modesty, a trait certainly valued in Victorian women. Her secretive avoidance of describing her attractions to men keeps the novel mild enough for readers of all ages. Lucy is also notoriously self-censored and represses much of her emotion. That the emphasis is not on her romantic endeavors certainly indicates Lucy’s independent nature, but it does not necessarily mean she is not heterosexual. The subtle portrayal of her attraction to Graham and later M. Paul merely draws attention to the fact that overt statement is not always useful in the telling of a realistic story.

To reinforce her normality and the story’s adherence to ‘tradition’ as Boone would say, Brontë portrays Lucy as heterosexual and, at times, quite womanly. Lucy performs femininity when, although she plays a man in the school production, she refuses to completely cross-dress, choosing instead to wear her own clothing with a few manly attributes that will help the audience determine her (character’s) gender. This episode could be read the other way, though: by asserting her choice to not dress like a man, Lucy is defying authority in a masculine way, saying, “it must be arranged in my own way: nobody must meddle; the things must not be forced upon me” (V 153).<sup>1</sup> To combine the two readings of the passage (that Lucy is masculine or feminine), we must simply imagine what she looked like in a woman’s dress and men’s accessories. Brontë gives us a visual depiction of Lucy’s varied gender performance throughout the entire novel by

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<sup>1</sup> In a similar move, Jane Eyre refuses to perform (play at the piano) for Mr. Rochester and his bourgeois guests, asserting her masculine right to deny his request.



showing Lucy dressed as both a woman and a man; it is an outwardly visible sign that Lucy is dual-gendered and bi-sexual.

Brontë shows us these conflicting sides of Lucy's identity to point to conflicting ideas of gender. Foster describes the two sides of Lucy:

These alternative modes of female self-definition give Lucy the means of assessing and establishing her own selfhood; and it is in Brontë's presentation of her heroine's self-exploration that her sense of dichotomies is most vividly expressed. From the outset we are aware of contradictions in Lucy Snowe. On the one hand, she is passive, calm, and apparently resigned to a self-abnegating existence. [...] On the other hand, she reveals an unquenchable resilience and capacity for self-reliance. (103)

In defying the traditionally one-sided portrait of a Victorian woman, Brontë is inching closer to the realistic portrayal of a person who does not precisely fit into either gender mold or the dominant social expectations for female sexuality. It could be said that by "establishing her own selfhood," she is creating a space for herself which is *outside* the social norm of chastity-or-repression, a space which bridges the two via careful portrayal of fantasies in euphemism. Amanda Anderson agrees, asserting that Lucy's "self-abnegating" and "self-reliance" that Foster describes are Brontë's way of creating a "cultivation of detachment" which is also "a critique of contemporary gender roles" (48).

Brontë also portrays another woman in *Villette* who seems to have "establish[ed] her own selfhood" in the figure of Vashti the performer, "an unique woman" (V 291). Before Lucy-the-narrator even reveals her name to us, we are aroused to curiosity, and the erotic nature of the performance ahead is alluded to: "[Dr. Bretton] mentioned a name that thrilled me—a name that, in those days, could thrill Europe" (V 288). The

anonymized and sexually-charged actress could be anyone, and perhaps, is everyone, a figure standing publicly for all the privatized sexualities running throughout the novel. Lucy is duly fascinated by her, and before Vashti appears on stage, she is characterized as “a being whose powers [Lucy] had heard reports which made [her] conceive peculiar anticipations” such as “strange curiosity, [and] feelings [...] of riveted interest” (V 290-91). Could it be that her mere reputation has gotten Lucy sexually aroused?

As Vashti arrives onstage, the language is charged and hot; within one paragraph appear the words “shine,” “might,” “star,” “lava,” and “glow” (V 291). The strength, brightness, and hot, liquid language point to sexual arousal. Lucy-the-narrator then describes the actress boldly, saying “Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man [...] It was a marvelous sight: a mighty revelation. It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral”—a real range along and across dichotomies, escaping true definition but inspiring arousal from both women and men (V 291). This range, unlimited by distinctions between set binaries, thus “calls into question [...] the closed forms of male culture” (Gilbert, Gubar 424). Then, in a fit of graphic, erotically-charged violence, Lucy describes the action on stage with visions of penetration: “swordsmen thrust through” and “bulls gor[e] horses” (V 291). Furthermore, Vashti is not even properly dressed, she is merely “draped in pale antique folds” and her nakedness, performance likened to violent penetration, and erotic, passionate dual-gender make it impossible for Lucy to look away (V 291).

This scene, it is often said, mimics Brontë’s own reaction to seeing the actress Rachel onstage: there are hints of jealousy of the freedom the performers possess,

attraction to aspects of masculine power, and enchantment by the feminine softness occasionally exposed by both Vashti and Rachel. Elizabeth Gaskell, in her biography of Brontë, quotes Brontë as having written a description remarkably similar to Lucy's of Vashti, saying "Rachel [was] a *wonderful* sight—*terrible* as if the earth had cracked deep at your feet, and revealed a glimpse of hell. I shall never forget it. She made me *shudder* to the marrow of my bones" (382 emphasis mine) and again later, in another letter, Brontë writes:

Rachel's acting transfixed me with *wonder*, *enchained* me with interest, and *thrilled* me with horror. The tremendous force with which she expresses the very worst *passions* in their strongest essence forms an exhibition as *exciting* as the bull-fights of Spain [...] It is scarcely human nature that she shows you; it is something *wilder* and worse; the feelings and fury of a fiend. (394 emphasis mine)

In both of these descriptions, Brontë uses strong words to convey the other-ness of the performer as specifically related to her emotional and erotic impacts on the audience. The appeal, it would seem, is that these women (Vashti and her real-world counterpart, Rachel) have broken out of the "angel in the house" mold and created a powerful independent presence for themselves in the phallocentric world. They wear their erotic desires openly and publicly express their sexual perversions on stage. That Brontë should include such a sight for Lucy in *Villette* helps the reader discover the less obvious, euphemistic scenes of eroticism and sexual expressions throughout.

Rachel epitomized for Brontë the strange mixing of gender and eroticism that reflected the rapidly changing world she lived in. Since modes defined by society are constantly evolving, they are impossible to fully emulate at all times. Sexuality, though

beginning to be widely discussed, was still an area of science that was hard to pin down. What was 'normal'? What was 'fetish'? What could be said aloud in public or read by young women? Some eroticism remains unwritable by all but the most sensationalist of writers. Social ideals put pressure on open sexuality and encourage chastity in the face of changing times. By maintaining an undefined gender and sexuality, Lucy becomes more of a fully developed character and she is a more accurate representation of an individual, more 'real' than 'ideal.' Voskuil agrees, saying Brontë "grounds women's identity not in a transcendental, naturalized idea but in the individual, acculturated subject" (425). So we can see that Brontë resorts to euphemism to negotiate the combination of the impulse to reflect the sexually charged realities of Lucy's adventures and a public which demanded tame, moralizing characters.

Using these non-traditional portrayals of gender performances, Brontë takes on the issue of women's sexual power and agency within the framework of independence. Often, self-sufficient women were characterized as wild and uncontrolled, openly sexual and dangerous to society because of their corrupting tendencies. This independence is aligned with a certain masculinization of the character, and indicates an inferiority in women who wanted to be (or were) married. As Brontë privileges her independent female characters, the modern reader tends to judge overly dependent women unfavorably. The negative connotation attached to these dependent women is closely related to the idea that womanhood is defined as lack (as compared to man) and/or desire (for a man), so the fully independent woman, who lacks nothing and desires none beside

herself, is outside of definition (Stockton xvi).<sup>2</sup> Society shuns that which it cannot understand; the idea of women as sexual beings was an utterly repressed concept in proper spheres, for if it became widely known that women were as passionate as men, they would usurp some of the sexual power of men and become closer to equals.<sup>3</sup> This fear of equality (on the part of men in patriarchal society) motivated biased treatment of the sexes; which is aptly summed up by Patricia Beer, who says, “she [Brontë] challenged the accepted method of educating girls, who might well be capable and strong-minded, to be frail and silly and sheltered while turning boys who might really be frail and silly loose on the world” (31). Brontë herself echoes this very sentiment in *Shirley* via Caroline’s musings: “[Fathers] keep your girls’ minds narrow and fettered—they will still be a plague and a care, sometimes a disgrace to you: cultivate them—give them scope and work—they will be your gayest companions in health; your tenderest nurses in sickness; your most faithful prop in age” (330). Indeed, it seems that the general thought was that if these under-educated, un-nurtured women remained unrestrained by marriage, they would invariably run wild, become prostitutes, and corrupt youth with this usurped power instead of becoming productive, independent members of society (as Brontë’s heroines do).

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<sup>2</sup> Stockton relies heavily on Luce Irigaray’s works countering Freudian theories here.

<sup>3</sup> Certainly, we must allow space for women like Rachel (Vashti) to exist, clearly un-repressed as she was. But let us also remember that she was a member of the stigmatized, sexualized “actress” category, not the average ‘old maid.’ In this way, she was a spectacle who sacrificed her socially acceptable status for self-sufficiency, not an individual woman struggling to be independent.

The menace single women supposedly posed to society helped propagate the widely held idea that independent women do not enjoy being independent and/or that independence is not a choice, but a necessity, essentially discouraging any female from desiring autonomy. As Boone says, “what was viewed as a matter of choice and escape for men [bachelorhood] was transformed into a condition of unfortunate circumstance and constriction for women [spinsterhood]” (279). Perhaps because of her refusal to be a ‘typical’ Victorian woman, Ewbank says that Lucy’s is a story of loneliness: “Lucy’s emotions, rather than any external events, create the real structure of the novel: a series of crises, in which utter depression threatens Lucy, and, between them, stretches of the empty life of an unloved being” (175). Despite its sometimes dark gothic undertones, I believe *Villette* gives single women more hope than despair; Lucy *is* loved (by M. Paul until his death) and her life is *not* empty (she is fulfilled by running her own school). However, by traditional standards, the independent woman at the end of the novel can only be viewed with pity because she is single.

The ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of independence is, of course, marriage. Brontë shows the reader two candidates for this path to nuptials in *Villette*: Paulina and Ginevra. Although there is a price to pay for marriage, as Emily Toth says, “if the heroine chooses Love, she loses her independence [...] If she chooses independence (Freedom), too often she must renounce Love,” both girls are happy to make the exchange (647). As we’ve already discovered, Paulina buys into the feminine ideal very quickly: by the time we meet her in the novel at age six, she is already performing as the “angel in the house.” It is no surprise that the masculinized Lucy is attracted to her, but Brontë is careful to not

make Polly completely perfect. Contrary to custom, she refuses to give up her father when she obtains a husband. By insisting on her duties to both father and husband, she quietly asserts *her* masculinity in having the power to choose (strangely enough in her submission to not one, but two men.)

Ginevra Fanshaw is also a spectacular case-study of some of the aspects of the ideal Victorian woman. While Polly has taken over the domestic aspects, Ginevra assumes a prominent role in the marriage market as a commercial endeavor. Stockton, for example, discusses at length Ginevra's "self-commodification," her "savvy as a sexual trader," and her coquetry (141). Polly "waits quietly" for marriage while Ginevra "openly angles" for it (Foster 102). Ginevra's scheming and planning indicate that her erotic desires as a woman have been mixed with the powerful machinations of a man. Furthermore, her marriage is another opportunity to look at homosexuality in the novel. I have already discussed her relationship with Lucy, and although her marriage is outwardly heterosexual, she marries a man who is consistently described in feminine language. Lucy talks of Alfred de Hamal in diminutive terms; he is a "little dandy [...]" his lineaments were small, and so were his hands and feet; he was so pretty and smooth, and as trim as a doll" (V 161). While he is courting her, Alfred even cross-dresses as a nun, a figure which has lesbian connotations and also makes him a sort of transvestite (Marcus, Sharon 102). Brontë seems to be presenting the reader with the idea that despite outward appearances (a traditionally feminine woman and an attractive, rich male suitor) there are still undercurrents of unstable gender roles in any marriage and hints of subversive sexualities even in the most 'normal' of couples. She covers homosexuality

and transvestitism in the blanket of heterosexual marriage, masking the fetish with the norm via innocent-seeming euphemistic costume play.

Graham also buys into the full definition of Victorian genders and the marriage market, and courts both Ginevra and Polly. Having defined Polly as the nearly-ideal Victorian woman, it is clear why Graham, the nearly-ideal Victorian man, would be paired with her in the end. Brontë sets up this marriage as an example of the ‘perfect’ couple and Lucy-as-narrator goes on at length describing how happy they are together. While I doubt the idea that it is Brontë’s intention to support and perpetuate cultural ideals of ‘the perfect woman’ marrying ‘the perfect man’,<sup>4</sup> I think perhaps this can be read as her assertion that there is certainly a spectrum of possibilities and that Polly and Graham are as near-perfect as possible; they are a nod toward the dominant heterosexual paradigm and a reification of the social norms Brontë is working within to present her less traditional characters.

Brontë held that instead of an either / or dichotomy of independence or patriarchal submission to a husband, a marriage of equals should be the ultimate goal (Beer 107). Balance is often the question in Brontë: balance between genders, balance between independence and emotional or sexual fulfillment. Balance between partners in a marriage is logically the end objective. This concept may be why Brontë herself turned down several suitors before agreeing to marry Arthur Bell Nicholls, why Lucy insists on

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<sup>4</sup> By this I simply mean that I do not believe that Brontë thought that there *was* such a thing as a fully feminine woman or a fully masculine man: both ideals, being *ideals*, would have been impossible.



a solitary life until she realizes that she loves M. Paul, and why Jane cannot marry Rochester while he has another wife; these women would all rather be alone than marry the ‘wrong’ man.

An episode that I have already established as a crucial point of Lucy’s self-pleasure and self-power also sums up the tensions between independence and marriage, sexual release and socially acceptable chastity. The scene demonstrates Lucy’s ability to simultaneously exist on all sides of the dichotomies, and is described thus by Beer:

In the magnificent chapter at the end of the book where Lucy, drugged by her enemies, shakes off the sedative and breaks out of the *pensionnat* to wander through the streets and parks of Villette alone in a festive mob, she seems a heroine, the glorious prototype of all struggling imprisoned women, until we reflect that she is looking for the reactionary Paul Emanuel; she is looking for a man. (126)

Lucy, independent woman, is still caught in the act of wanting a man. In this case, Brontë seems to be showing the reader that it is difficult to *remain* an independent woman, but the ending solves the problem of the either/or duality. Boone claims that this ending spares the reader from finding out if “Lucy’s hard-earned selfhood” is endangered or even compromised by the “emotional bondage [of] love” in her marriage to M. Paul (99), and praises Brontë’s solution as a “manipulation [that] allow[s] her to sidestep the difficulties of representing Lucy as an independently spirited but married woman” (221). Brontë resists coming down on either side of the fence, just as she refuses to allow her characters to be either entirely masculine or entirely feminine, quietly chaste or overtly eroticized.

Lucy's difficulty in marrying M. Paul is 'solved' by Brontë's cleverly ambiguous ending. *Jane Eyre* presents a different 'solution;' instead of the marriage remaining unresolved, Brontë writes the characters around their union—that is to say, she re-writes their actual physical situations to suit the marriage so that there is no longer a conflict between Jane's fiery spirit and submission to her new husband. But let us begin from the beginning: Jane's childhood indoctrination into the ways of Victorian womanhood (i.e. submission to phallogentric, patriarchal society) at the hands of her Aunt Reed is a fundamental part of Jane's later development into an independent woman.

Jane's childhood is one of severe repression. She is despised by her foster family, the Reeds, and is ignored or openly ridiculed by these, her only (known) relatives. The air of domination surrounds little Jane, pressing on her nerves, and eventually comes to a head in the red-room, the earliest pivotal point in the narrative. Here, the potential of a loving family and a place in the family as a respected and worthy relative is symbolized in the absent presence of her uncle, while her actual position as the unwanted foreigner is reinforced by her forced occupation of the room as a punishment for a deed undone. The idea, as Mrs. Reed says, is to instill a "condition of perfect submission and stillness" to obtain "liberat[ion]" (*JE* 24).

Jane's very first rebellion follows shortly after the red-room episode, and even still she seems to be not fully in control of herself: "'What would Uncle Reed say to you if he were alive?' was my scarcely voluntary reply. I say scarcely voluntary, for it seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance; something spoke out of me over which I had no control" (*JE* 35). It is as though the inner

spark of her future independent nature is beginning to press through the darkness of the Reed household. Shortly after the visit from Mr. Brocklehurst of Lowood school, that independence bursts free: “*Speak* I must; I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn” (*JE* 45, emphasis original).<sup>5</sup> That compulsion to right the wrongs committed throughout her childhood helps Jane break away from her repressive bounds and we see her real life beginning, a sort of re-birth of her true nature: “Ere I had finished this reply [to Mrs. Reed] my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhopd-for liberty” (*JE* 46). Even at age ten, Jane begins to recognize the power of her own voice and its underlying passions; she gains a “fierce pleasure” from speaking her mind to her elder (*JE* 46).

As soon as Jane’s independent nature begins to bloom at Gateshead, she is sent away to the equally repressive Lowood school. The school itself is designed to “mortify” students and impress upon them ‘usefulness’ and ‘humility’ (*JE* 42-43). The very structure of the academy is overt patriarchy: the only man involved is the unquestionable authority. Jane does, happily, encounter two positive female role-models within Lowood, the superintendent Miss Temple and her friend Helen Burns. While Mr. Brocklehurst is away, Miss Temple inhabits a position of relative authority and fills it with her caring, responsible, mentor-like approach. She is the gentle mother-figure authority Jane has

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<sup>5</sup> This specific quote is often referenced in relation to Jane’s particular *authority* as she writes her autobiography; it is considered a round-about comment on her compulsion to tell her own story.

never known. A fine portrait of femininity, Miss Temple's very name, with its worshipful connotations, implies her status as an 'angel of the (school) house' (Gilbert, Gubar 344). She teaches Jane the softer side of submission, a way to carve out a place for oneself while fitting in with society. And Jane wants so desperately to fit in.

Likewise, Helen Burns is a quietly independent young girl, wildly intelligent but modest. Even the "burning" her name indicates is not unbecoming in Helen, for her passions are directed at God (Gilbert, Gubar 345-6). Religious and wise beyond her years, she has many lessons to teach Jane before her untimely death: "It would be your duty to bear it [punishment], if you could not avoid it. It is weak and silly to say you *cannot bear* what it is your fate to be required to bear. [...] Learn from me not to judge by appearances" (68 emphasis original). Miss Temple and Helen are models of how an independent spirit can endure submission through perseverance; they maintain a sort of power by willingly yielding when necessary.

After six years as a pupil at Lowood, Jane follows in the footsteps of her first (and only?) positive female role-model and becomes a teacher there. But soon, Miss Temple herself leaves and Jane "remember[s] that the real world [is] wide" and chooses to find a new situation for herself (*JE* 101). Her advertisements land her the position at Thornfield Hall, setting in motion her romance with its master, Rochester. While he is away, Jane experiences relative freedom and authority in the household; she has a rather masculine role as the "partner" in heading the house opposite Mrs. Fairfax, and, according to stereotypes of the day, she is masculinized by the fact that she is the most educated member of the household as well. She is not quite so insistent in her masculinity as Lucy

Snowe, however: Jane says, “I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit” (*JE* 117). As she discovers later, her ever-ready appearance perfectly suits Rochester’s ‘at any hour’ visits.

Jane first discusses Rochester with Mrs. Fairfax while going through unused rooms in the house, and Brontë’s lavish descriptions of the room’s interior hints at the relationship to come: the red and white drawing room reminds Jane of “the general blending of snow and fire” (*JE* 124). Indeed, Rochester, cold and indecipherable for much of the novel pairs well with Jane’s fiery temperament and fierce honesty. On the other hand, we find that Rochester is a man of hot passions and Jane can be quite pragmatic and cool when it comes to their love for each other.

Throughout their “courtship,” Jane and Rochester find that discussion by the fire pleases them most; Carla Kaplan’s “erotics of talk” reappears as the two have a passionate power struggle through “seductive discourse” which brings both pleasure (15). In one of their earliest conversations, Rochester says, “I am disposed to be gregarious and communicative tonight [...] and that is why I sent for you. [...] You, I am persuaded, can suit me if you will. [...] It would please me now to draw you out—to learn more of you—therefore speak” (159). By the time they are married, Jane credits their happiness to this same “erotics of talk,” saying, “we talk, I believe, all day long; [...] all my confidence is bestowed on him; all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character; perfect concord is the result” (522). Rowen Pelling agrees, saying that the “fierce verbal sparring” between Rochester and Jane “as with Shakespeare’s Beatrice and Benedict, is the engine of erotic tension that drives the entire work” (52).

With this subtle but overarching erotic force of language in mind, I will be focusing on the other manifestations of their sexual interplay.

The first time we see Rochester, both he and Jane are described in terms of fantastical creatures; Rochester confesses later, “when you [Jane] came on me in the Hay-lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales,” likewise, in the moment Jane thought Rochester was a mythical creature, a “gytrash” (146, 134). No “gytrash” indeed, but Rochester appears on a horse—the very symbol of virile sexuality and erotic passion. What does it mean, then, that as he passes Jane he is unseated? Jane’s physical effect is to throw Rochester, to bring him down from his passions so that they can be on equal footing. It is only with her help that he can re-mount. Brontë places a woman’s passion on the same level as a man’s, and only allows them to go forward after establishing their equality.

During one of their early conversations together, Rochester acknowledges that although he has since fallen by many circumstances, he “was [Jane’s] equal at eighteen—quite [her] equal” (*JE* 162). This sets up the pair for Brontë’s investigation into how they have come to be *unequal* (in age, in class, in morality) and thus how to fix their inequalities so that their marriage is an appropriately matched one. Rochester begins by telling Jane of a few of his indiscretions (notably with Céline Varens) and he says, “Since happiness has been irrevocably denied me, I have a right to get pleasure out of life” (*JE* 163). His determination to pursue pleasure rather than happiness begs the question, can one not have both? Jane objects to his aims and implies that indeed, pleasure comes from the appropriate pursuit of happiness. She teaches him that to desire happiness brings

pleasure, just as she desires him and gets pleasure from him: “his presence in a room was more cheering than the brightest fire” (*JE* 175).

In one of the earliest instances of Jane and Rochester’s cross from employer and employee to lovers, a literal fire wakes Jane and takes her to Rochester’s bedside. That she should be the one to discover him nearly engulfed in flame hints at their hot passions. After she saves his life, Rochester is energetic in his thanks and nearly obsessive in his desire for Jane to express her affection for him: “strange energy was in his voice; strange fire in his look” (*JE* 180). In addition to the literal fire, then, Rochester is under the influence of the fire of passion. Jane retires to bed—not to sleep, but to dwell on the erotic desires she had caught a glimpse of in her Master’s countenance. Jane quickly realizes that she harbors a secret passion for her employer as well, and compares him to all of his bourgeois guests; obviously none of them can compare to “his look of native pith and genuine power” (207). This power translates into a sexual potency Rochester holds over Jane. Brontë’s subtlety in portraying the erotic side of a not-quite courtship is nuanced and complex, but the reader readily picks up on the sexual tension between Jane and Rochester.

Then there is what many consider the most climactic of the erotic scenes between Rochester and Jane, the scene of their meeting in the orchard. Before the truth is out that his courtship of Blanche Ingram is a farce, Rochester cannot resist moving toward a physical relationship with Jane, who has just protested that it would break her heart to stay near Rochester if he were married to Blanche. She says that she has been honest with him, indeed is equal to him under God. Rochester’s reaction is to acknowledge their

equality by embracing her: “‘As we are!’ repeated Mr. Rochester—‘so,’ he added, inclosing [Jane] in his arms, gathering [her] to his breast, pressing his lips on [her] lips; ‘so, Jane!’” (*JE* 296). Even in the solitude of the orchard, this liberty Rochester takes offends Jane and her independence, brewing since childhood, flares into sight: “no net ensnares me; I am a free human being, with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you” (*JE* 297). Jane’s sense of her own power, built up through her self-sufficiency and related to her own mastery of her erotic passions, enables her to resist Rochester and maintain her independence.

After confessing that he does not intend to marry Miss Ingram, Rochester begs Jane to marry him and becomes physically aroused by the prospect: “his face was very much agitated and very much flushed, and there were strong workings in the features, and strange gleams in the eyes” (*JE* 298). Before long, Rochester is asking Jane to consummate their impending marriage there in the garden: “‘come to me—come to me entirely now,’ said he; and added, in his deepest tone, speaking in my ear as his cheek was laid on mine, ‘Make my happiness—I will make yours’” (*JE* 299). The storm that suddenly comes upon them is like a raging climax to their desires, and results in Rochester helping Jane take off her wet clothing in the front hall. This orchard episode is full of repressed and subtle passions, indeed, storms of erotic power, revealed to us only through Brontë’s carefully concealed euphemisms.

That Jane and Rochester share a congenial marriage is not under question, despite the emphasis on their passions; emotions were involved as well and are signaled throughout the story, as when Jane says, after her return from staying at Gateshead



through the death of Mrs. Reed, “never had he called me more frequently to his presence—never been kinder to me when there—and, alas! never had I loved him so well” and later, after they are engaged the first time, “I turned my lips to the hand that lay on my shoulder. I loved him very much—more than I could trust myself to say—more than words had power to express” (289). But Brontë must find a way, as she does in *Villette*, to make the man deserving of her independent heroine.

Through another fire—another raging, passionate symbol—Brontë destroys Bertha Mason and humbles Rochester. The two acts, taken jointly, mean that Jane is now free to marry her Master: she has been brought up to his economic status through her inheritance, and he has been feminized sufficiently by his debilitating injuries that Jane’s willful personality will not be subjected to patriarchal dominance. Kaplan, with her theory of discourse-as-erotic, points out that by blinding Rochester and preventing him from reading and writing, Brontë allows Jane to assume much of the power in the relationship. Ann Ferguson, advocating androgyny (or, I would say, bi-sexuality), says that without such gender equality, “an ideal love relationship between the sexes is not possible” (244). Instead, since Rochester is sufficiently feminized and Jane sufficiently masculinized, their marriage *can* be “love between equals” (Ferguson 244).

Although Jane’s relationship with Rochester is balanced, we must remember that Brontë was interested in paths other than marriage as well. What alternatives does she present to the reader for the other independent women of *Jane Eyre*? Miss Temple, Jane’s first mentor, also marries despite her demonstrated ability to financially support herself (through her superintendency of Lowood school). Likewise, Diana and Mary

Rivers, despite each having a five-thousand pound ‘competency’ of their own, marry and settle in to subordinate wifely positions, and so also with Georgiana Reed. These marriages all seem to be economical, providing “security at the cost of individual independence” (Vanden Bossche 58). Is there any other option for women in *Jane Eyre*? Is the only way of escaping marriage to become a Céline Varens, a woman with a bad reputation and little respect, or an Eliza Reed, walled away in her own chosen prison? Perhaps it is insanity, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar say is the case with Bertha Mason, or death, as the “rigorously autonomous” Helen Burns portrays (Vanden Bossche 58). Even in her subsequent novel, *Shirley*, Brontë ends with not one, but two marriages. Following *Shirley* is *Villette*, and, as Gilbert and Gubar say, *Villette* is “the most obviously eccentric of Brontë’s novels, and thus the one that comes closest to openly presenting its readers with an alternative female aesthetic” (314). Perhaps Brontë merely makes us wait until *Villette* to fully develop her portrait of the independent woman who, rather than ending happily married, ends with her own self-sufficient school.

As Chris R. Vanden Bossche says, “both the entrepreneurial and the genteel ethos offer forms of social agency, but for women this agency is limited” (57). Despite the limitations, Brontë is careful to encourage independence in women both married and unmarried; indeed, all of her major (and many minor) female characters have work and make a living for themselves. She also recognizes society’s mandate for heterosexual union, though, and acknowledges this ‘end goal’ and the traditional Victorian novel marriage plot at the end of each of her novels. But she is no Jane Austen. Each man earns his woman, or is made equal to her. Each woman prioritizes her own happiness and

authors her own destiny. By assuming a powerful place in their relationships, both Lucy and Jane establish themselves as women in control of their passions. They own their sex, they own their identity.

By portraying a range of identities, independence, gender, and sexuality, Brontë portrays both the social ideals of her time and also questions those very traditions. Single and married, masculine and feminine, her heroines probe big issues that could not be openly discussed, and so Brontë writes through figurative language and euphemism. Read carefully, *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* are deep, well-rounded portraits of a complicated world. Brontë's portraits of real characters, blends of binaries, and subtle investigation of social norms are accomplished by complex narrative strategies but are conveyed to the public in accessible forms. The combination of literal reading and underlying meaning help Brontë discuss deeper social issues and expose atypical gender performances and sexualities.

## CHAPTER IV

## CONCLUSION

But Art, -- wherein man nowise speaks to men,  
 Only to mankind, -- Art may tell a truth  
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,  
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.  
 -Robert Browning, "The Ring and the Book"

Charlotte Brontë was clearly not one to stick to typical Victorian representations of gender and sexuality, although she did work within the general framework of the marriage plot. Her strong female characters reflect a deep inquiry into the role of women and sex in society, pursued in complicated narrative strategies and figurative language. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* question social ideals and greater ideologies, and both attempt to include the non-standard figure of the independent woman as well as taboo erotic scenes.

Throughout the novels, we can see that Brontë depicts expressions of female sexuality as a range rather than a mutually exclusive dichotomy of Virgin or Magdalene. As Robyn R. Warhol says, this "doubling" that Brontë takes part in "is to resist categorizing as one thing or the other; to invoke 'doubleness' is to address binary oppositions without resting comfortably in either of the two terms being opposed"; Brontë shows "binaries not as opposed, but as coexisting" (857-58). Lucy in *Villette* seems to have the most balance between gender identities and sexual expressions; not

neuter, but a bi-sexual character, not devoid of passion but not overly eroticized.

Likewise, Jane in *Jane Eyre* experiments with different power roles and sexualities.

Brontë “observes in men and women the perpetual shifting of their conventional attributes and responses,” and by accurately reporting (though often in veiled terms) instead of idealizing in her novel, she approaches a new realist sensibility (Beer 110).

These two novels, with all their mixed gender performances and sexual expressions, are representations of Brontë’s own struggle with the idea of social norms and her rejection of simple dichotomies of sex and eroticism. Her experiences with love and power, submission and dominance, passion and sobriety, independence and reliance on others all contribute, consciously or unconsciously, to the ranges of gender performance her characters engage. They are neither male nor female, but each is both. Rather than a dichotomy, gender performance translates into each character’s singular blend of sexualities; Brontë shows us that the world is thoroughly bi-sexual.

Through her subtle manipulation of genders and characters, Brontë illustrates the complexity of combining realistic portrayals of the human experience and socially acceptable ideals in her work. To be loyal to portraying the world as it is necessarily includes less savory scenes, sometimes steamy, but the general public demanded clean-cut and wholesome literature. To mediate her role as an artist and the pressures she experienced to publish her work, Brontë was forced to hide eroticism in figurative language. The careful bridge created between the realities of sex and the ideologies of chastity allows both to have a presence in *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, not mingling but coexisting one atop the other in euphemism.

Real and ideal are seemingly irreconcilable, and yet both exist in individuals and literature simultaneously. Occasionally, the ideal is enacted in reality, or reality influences what is considered ideal, but for the most part the realms are distinct. Once an ideal is created, however, it is by definition removed from the world of physical possibility. The relationship is unbreakable: reality is a constant struggle toward the ideal. Since the individual is portrayed as fighting *against* his own desires and *toward* the standards of society, it is understandable that they are sometimes considered opposites. I believe that, although often contradictory, they are not entirely dissimilar but merely operate on different levels. Given these interactions, I would follow Chris R. Vanden Bossche's train of inquiry and ask, now that we know that Brontë was interested in probing ideals, what effects did her novels have on society's conceptions? Essentially, could we consider her a so-called "proto-feminist" who enacted change for women?

Perhaps the answer is "perhaps." Brontë is certainly on the path to what we call "feminism," and helps to open discourses on oft-repressed topics such as women's independence and eroticism. This quiet portrayal of the subversive could easily be defined as 'the first step' to opening the field for debate and change—after all, society cannot attempt to change what it does not see. John Kucich calls the nineteenth-century novel "both a reliable cultural document and an effective agent of social transformation" (4). In literature, we can see the interaction between the real and the ideal as novelists attempt to inform the audience, but also portray their narrative with realism within just a few hundred pages of text.

Both *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* are, on the surface, appropriate for young women but nonetheless subtly probe deeper issues of gender and sexuality. They partake in what Foucault describes as “sex characterized essentially by the interplay of presence and absence, the visible and the hidden” (153) and Cohen refines to “the form of double-discourse that tells without saying, that announces the importance of sexual secrets through their ineffability” (90). Religious, edifying, and mostly innocent, Brontë’s novels encourage virtuous life, independent strength, and respectable marriage. Read with an eye for subtext, though, they become much more complicated and reflective of life. Suddenly, there are episodes of homo- and auto-eroticism, forbidden love, and illicit dalliances.

To begin with, Lucy and Jane are trained by their guardians to participate in a patriarchal society based on the obedience and submission of women. Ginevra and Polly in *Villette* are examples of two of the common roles available to women: that of the quiet and demure wife, and that of the commodified marriage market. Brontë was not sufficiently satisfied with either of these ideas to bestow those types of lives on her heroines, however, and Lucy and Jane show us two more, similar options for less traditionally ‘feminine’ women.

Lucy and Jane are less ‘feminine’ in a sense because they are both independent spirits who chose to maintain their self-sufficiency despite hardships. They are also assertive and opinionated. The paths Brontë shows us through Lucy and Jane are more “proto-feminist” than those of Ginevra, Polly, or, say, any of Jane Austen’s ladies. Lucy shows us a young woman determined to make her own financial way in the world.

Similarly, Jane refuses to compromise her morals. Both women remain dedicated to their values; they stick to their guns.

Although independent, Brontë's protagonists do have close friendships, and we relate to their bildungsroman-like periods of growth and self-realization. Through their experimentation, sometimes sexual, with relationships with their girl-friends, both Lucy and Jane blossom in the knowledge of what love and passion can be. Lucy enjoys being a masculine figure in these homosocial/homosexual encounters, especially where Ginevra is involved. Jane, on the other hand, prefers companions who are skilled orators or very similar to herself, easily seen in her string of romances with Helen Burns, Miss Temple, and the Rivers sisters.

Their early experimentation and maturing passions combine with each woman's independent nature to produce autoerotic moments of discovery. In both *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, Brontë uses lush greenery and garden imagery to indicate the solitary trysts of the heroines: in the Forbidden Alley and the Park, as well as in the lane near Thornfield and the Orchard, Brontë uses dripping dew, lush flowers, and subtle color indicators to indicate underlying autoeroticism. Since, as Foucault points out, self-pleasure was perhaps the most taboo of all sexual deeds, Brontë hid the act in natural scenery.

Brontë does not stop there, though. She has explored homoerotic and autoerotic incidents, and along the way has questioned gender performances. But in each of her novels she is also fascinated with working through the possibilities for unequal matches, like those between a teacher and pupil or a master and governess. At least in part because of her own obsession with M. Heger, she doggedly pursues the ways these power-



relations play out through her characters. Power and sex are inextricably linked, and the balances sometimes parallel stereotypes for masculinity (powerful, passionate) and femininity (submissive). Although Helene Moglen suggests that these relationships beg the use of the term “sadoomasochistic,” Brontë plays with gender and power in such a way that sometimes lends her heroines the upper hand. Brontë is also careful to always create equality by the time the couples each commit to marriage.

It is important that each novel ends in a satisfying way for Lucy and Jane. As Boone suggests, the novel itself is sexual and so the endings must be sufficiently pleasing. For Lucy, Brontë makes M. Paul a dedicated fiancé and gives her a school and eternal independence. In the case of Jane, Brontë gives her an inheritance and also maims Rochester so that they are on more equal footing. In each case, the independence of the women is not compromised, but complemented and respected. These marriages play to the expectations of the Victorian audience and so allow Brontë to question certain aspects of nineteenth-century ideologies without being refused publication or suffering unpopularity.

The combination of figurative meaning and literal reading is one of Brontë’s best-used tools in writing novels. She knew that neither her publisher nor the general public would have been open to accepting more overt portrayals of the erotic, nor of open questioning of gender norms. Thus, the surface reading supports the casual reader while her more complex ideas can be read by the more dedicated members of her audience. Brontë uses euphemism and specialized narrative strategies to indicate and question reality under the guise of the traditional Victorian marriage plot.

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